

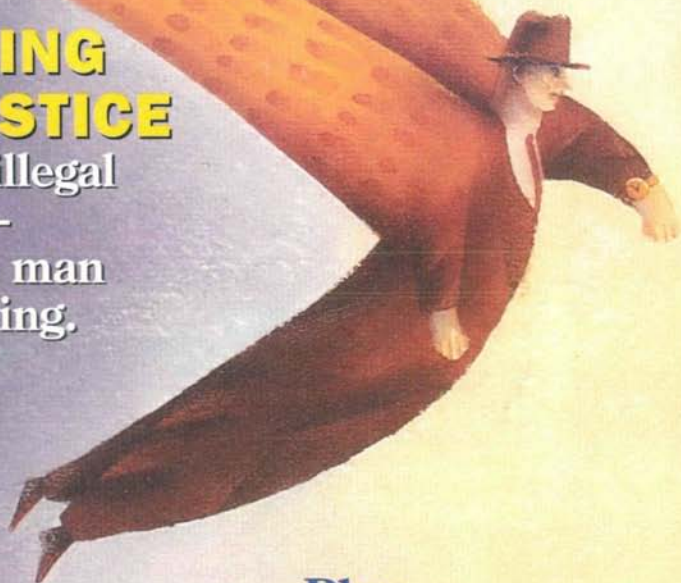
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 1999

LIGHTNING AND JUSTICE

It was an illegal
wolf hunt—
but an old man
was watching.

by DAVE
WASKIN



Plus...

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Ann Ripley

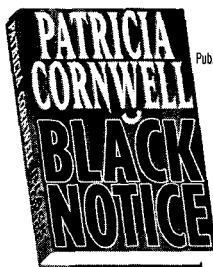
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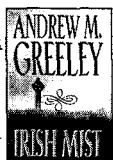


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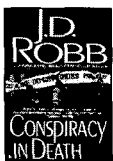
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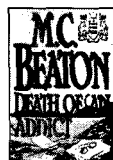
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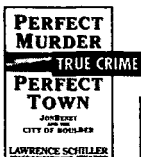
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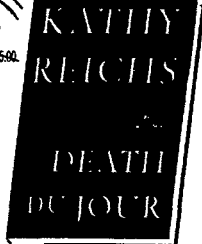
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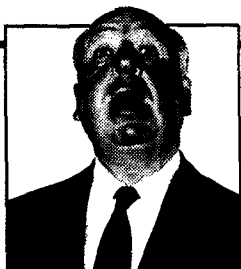
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GUEST EDITORIAL

Art Cosing

NOTE: In the June issue in this space we brought you a Guest Editorial by Joe Michael Feist about an intriguing Texas billboard mystery. Now comes Art Cosing, a frequent Mysterious Photograph contributor, with another puzzle.—Ed.

A Lovely Mystery

Public declarations of love and affection are not uncommon. The evidence is all around us. Lovesick Romeos never seem to tire. Many profess undying love and passion via newspaper ads, television announcements, and sometimes baseball scoreboards. Some of the more adventurous even hazard skywriting. But for the true romantic nothing will do like garish spray paint on a blank vertical surface—a clean wall, an unsullied bridge, a pristine billboard. This type of graffiti is definitely the poor man's Internet.

We have all seen these ugly val-

entines (misspellings and all): "HARRY LUVS MARY," or maybe "MARY LOVES HARRY," or even "HARRY LOVES RALPH." (Personally, I eagerly await that ultimate in narcissism: "HARRY LOVES HARRY.")

Well, just recently, on a back road outside of town, I encountered a truly remarkable example of graffiti mania—a lovely mystery unmatched in my experience, a genuine original that continues to haunt me.

The words were scrawled in startling fluorescent red paint, in foot-tall letters, in the center of a fifteen by twenty foot billboard (blank and white, apparently awaiting the appearance of a paying client). They read as follows:

LISA,
will
you marry
me?

MARK (*crossed out*)
HOWARD (*substituted*)

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Consider, if you will, the soap opera possibilities in this so-public drama:

(1) Did Howard cross out Mark's name and substitute his own? (*Too obvious!*)

(2) Did Mark cross out his own name and insert Howard's? (*Could be!*)

(3) What did Mark do to Howard if it was Howard who crossed out Mark's name?

(4) Is it possible that Lisa prefers Howard and it was she who crossed out Mark's name?

(5) Did Lisa (*that clever vixen!*) create this whole thing herself to make Mark jealous and prompt a real proposal from him?

(6) Who will marry Lisa? Mark? Howard? Or is there someone else in Lisa's complex love life? A Mister X, perhaps?

(7) Can all this be a plot hatched

by a Mister X to embarrass and anger Lisa and put a wall between her and Mark and/or Howard?

(8) Is there instead a Miss X in the mix who deeply loves Mark and doesn't want to lose him to the fickle Lisa, who is always surrounded by beaus? Could Miss X have crossed out Mark's name?

(9) Does Miss X know Mister X, and are they perhaps working together? She to get Mark, and he to get Lisa?

(10) Is, heaven forbid, Mark a married man? Is Howard?

(11) Will this billboard drama end up in violence? In the courts? On Jerry Springer? Will it become fodder for the grocery store tabloids? Will there be a TV mini-series?

I can't shake this thing. It's beginning to trouble my sleep . . .

Lisa, Mark, Howard, what's happening?

And now, from your editor . . . We have two new authors to welcome in this issue, both with first stories:

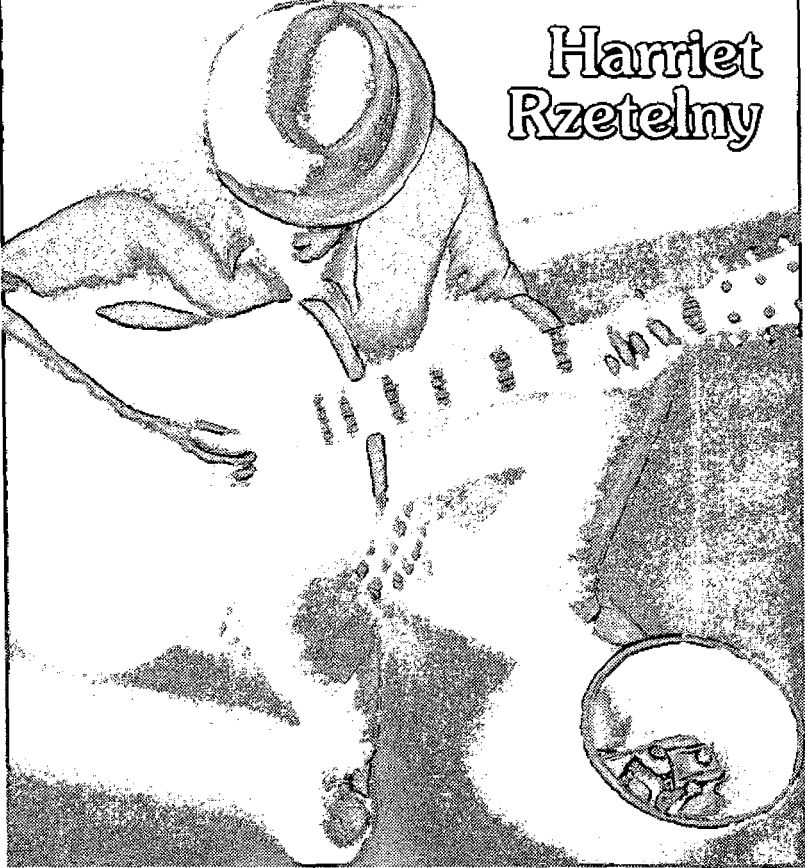
Harriet Rzetelny, the author of "Graveyard Blues," is a practicing psychotherapist with a master's in social work from Adelphi University; she also teaches courses in clinical practice with the elderly at NYU and Hunter. She "used to be a folksinger (I was the one who said Bob Dylan was derivative and would never make it). I was a hippie when hippies were called bohemians, lived in the East Village and the Lower East Side, was a single mother and did all the things one has to do if one has no skills or education but must feed a

family—from button saleslady in the last, great button store on the Lower East Side to appearing as Santa's pixie in the old A&S."

Lee Hickling, author of "Death in a State of Grace," is also a musician and a freelance writer. *His* M.A. is from SUNY at Albany. "Formerly I was a radio and TV reporter, a staff writer for the Binghamton (N.Y.) *Press*, and a Washington correspondent for the Gannett newspapers. . . I live now in a small village on an island in the Potomac River about fifty miles from Washington, D.C. . . I teach several musical instruments and play the organ for . . . two local churches. I sail an old wooden sloop."

Graveyard Blues

Harriet
Rzetelny



The first time I ever saw Willie Cobb he was sitting on an upturned milk crate in front of a used clothing store called Now and Again. He was raggin' the blues. The blues speak to hidden, smoky places in me, clandestine little corners filled with se-

cret joy and a deep, dark sadness that I barely understand. I have a collection that includes some real hard-to-find recordings like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson. So I told Randy, who was driving the agency van, to pull over.

Willie looked like a photo of an

old country blues singer come to life—oversized acoustic guitar in his hands, sharply creased fedora on his head, a cracked blue plastic bowl on the sidewalk in front of him. His tall skinny body, the color of polished walnut, was bobbing up and down, and he was singing:

*"Hey Billie Lee
Ma yellow honey bee
She's bowlegged and lazy
Cockeyed and crazy . . ."*

His voice was as wornout and rough as a used scouring pad, but his bony fingers slid up and down the long neck like they'd been burished with lemon oil. A few people were gathered around him, and one little girl in jeans and a Power Rangers jacket was dancing.

I was on my job as a caseworker for Project Contact. We scour the streets and alleys, abandoned loft buildings, and empty lots of our decaying Brooklyn waterfront neighborhood, reaching out to the homeless.

A lot of people don't understand why a nice-looking, educated white girl like myself wants to work with street people. I tell them that just because someone's homeless they're not any less a person. But the truth is I feel homeless myself in this world. I come from parents who lost everything—their home, their family, their village, everything—in the carnage that was Eastern Europe during the last World War. My mother spent her childhood in the concentration camps and then the refugee camps set up to house all those displaced people. As an adult she always kept a suitcase packed in a closet in our impeccably clean,

totally impersonal apartment so she could be ready to leave in a moment's notice. She never talked about these things, but early on I learned from her that life is precarious and it's best not to leave too much of yourself behind when you lock your front door because you'll never know if you'll see it again.

We pulled up in front of a hydrant and got out. It was a late autumn Thursday, and a wind was blowing in off the river, swirling around the old newspapers and Styrofoam cups that littered the streets. Randy told me the singer's name was Willie Cobb and that he was over eighty years old.

Randy's job title is Driver, but there's no way I could do my work without him. He has always lived in the neighborhood. A well-built Afro-American maybe in his early forties, which is a few years older than me, he wears gold wirerimmed glasses and comes to work every day dressed as though the clients were his Sunday relatives: starched white shirt, pressed jeans, gleaming leather jacket. He says the clients deserve at least that from him.

We call him The Amazing Randy because he doesn't miss a trick. It's usually Randy who spots the wisps of smoke or the brief flashes of movement in a rubble-filled lot—subtle indications of the more timid and frightened of the homeless people we're on the lookout for. I can sometimes feel their presence by the little tingles that run along my nerve endings, but he can see them.

Randy and I stood and listened for a while. Willie Cobb played in that

rhythmical, framing style of a lot of the old bluesmen who used the guitar mainly as a percussive background to their singing. The finish on the one he was playing was nearly rubbed away from long use, but his sound had the power and resonance of an Arkansas tent preacher. By the time the song ended I was just about dancing myself. I fished out two dollars from my bag.

"I have a recording of Blind Gully doing that one," I said, dropping them into his bowl.

His face lit up as if a switch had suddenly been turned on. "Blind Gully," he said almost reverently. "Now, I ain't met no young person for over forty years even heard of him."

I nodded. "It's sad, isn't it?"

"Time was when everybody up and down Highway 61 knew who Gully was." A small smile played around his lips. "I was Gully's lead boy, started runnin' with him when I was 'bout ten years old, stayed with him for over nine years. We must've traveled every mile of that ol' 61—on foot, from Memphis to New Orleans." He pronounced it as if it were one word—"Nworlins," with the accent on the *or*. "We'd come into a town, mebbe Clarksdale, and I'd lead him over to a busy corner. Well, we'd just set up and he'd commence shoutin'. Didn't take long for the people to come round. He'd start to play, and I'd pass the cup." He gave a little shake of his head as if to toss the memory back in the box where it belonged. "He was one of the great ones."

"You're not too bad yourself," I said.

He smiled, a quick and easy smile. "Can't do much pickin' any more. Arthritis won't let me. Bukka now—" He turned to a slim young man with cornrows and jittery eyes who had been standing nearby. "He's my great-grandson. He's the real bluesman in the family. Play us somethin', let these people hear what you can do."

Bukka shrugged and took the guitar from his great-grandfather's hands. He rested one foot against a fire hydrant and wrapped his fingers around the neck as if he were a mother who'd just been handed her baby.

"How 'bout the one Gully used to do, you know the one. 'Cellar Door Blues,'" Willie said.

Bukka's face got all sulky. "Been a lotta songs written since Gully died," he said. Willie glared at him. Bukka shrugged again and began to play some opening bars, and everything dissolved away into his music.

*"Blues hangin' out my window
Blues sittin' on my cellar door
So much blues round here baby
Never see daylight no mo'."*

Though his voice was smoother and less strident than Willie's, it was powerful and evoked the intensity of deep sadness and loss. The guitar playing that circled behind, around, and between the lyrics was something else: technically brilliant, aggressive, almost scornful, it was as if he were sitting on his own shoulder mocking the very simplicity of the words he was singing.

Willie was watching him with a curious expression—I could only call it a kind of hungry love. I used to

catch my mother sometimes watching me like that. It made me deeply anxious because at those moments I saw, living inside her, a starving, helpless creature, mutely beseeching me. I never knew what it was she needed because she never told me. It still makes me anxious, and she's been dead for over a year.

Some of the listeners had started to wander away while we were talking, but now they came back. This time nobody danced. Bukka's playing wasn't the kind you dance to; it was the kind you listen to with your mouth open.

Bukka finished and handed the guitar back to his great-grandfather. "Wow!" I said.

He shrugged nonchalantly. His eyes darted all around, landing nowhere. "This ol'-time stuff, I don't play it much. Nobody likes it 'cept him." With a toss of his head, he indicated the old man.

Randy had been standing a little to one side. Now he turned to Willie and said, "Yo, man. I see where the dude gets his talent from."

Willie shook his head. "Not from me he don't. That's not to say I wasn't good in my time. But good ain't nowhere near to great. Blind Gully was great. And Bukka here—" He waved his hand, and Bukka scowled at him, then looked down at his sneakers. "It's like it come straight from Gully, passed through me without my never really having it, and went direct into him."

"Why he always layin' all that Gully stuff on me?" Bukka mumbled.

Willie glared again at his great-grandson. "You be only half the man

Gully was, that'd be something." His hands caressed the guitar, stroking softly up and down the curved wooden sides.

"That's a beautiful instrument," I said, thinking how much I'd love to own one just like it even though it would be wasted on me, who could only strum a few chords.

"This ol' Gibson," he said softly. "Gully bought it off a bluesman who had his arm crippled in an accident and couldn't use it no more." Bukka rolled his eyes and looked pointedly bored; I wondered how many times he'd heard the story. "Paid him two dollars for it. Coupla years ago some white boy offered me over five hun'ed for it. Wouldn't sell it, though." The quick smile flashed on and off. "Most of 'em back then used a steel-body National. It could give you some sound—that was before amps and such. But not Gully. He liked the wood 'cause he said it sang along with him. 'Sides which, Gully didn't need no electrification. Him and this here Gibson, when he got it goin', was powerful enough all by theyselves to shake the walls of them jook joints." He played a few more bars of something. "Gonna be Bukka's someday."

"No stoppin' him once he starts," Bukka grumbled. "Rest of us might as well not be here." He took the guitar from his great-grandfather and started jamming to himself—some syncopated, rap-type rhythm. The way they passed that guitar back and forth, it was like alternating current, a symbol of the charged feeling that flowed between them.

Randy, who'd been peering into the distance, said, "I think that's

Honey Belle across the street, over in that doorway."

Honey Belle was known as the shy flower of the waterfront because she only came out at certain times. I'd been trying to meet her for the past couple of weeks. So we took our leave of Willie and Bukka, stopping in the van to get a sandwich from other stuff we carry—coffee urn, blankets, some clothes, information about housing, medical, and social services.

It had taken me several days of putting sandwiches down for her before Honey Belle would venture out to pick them up, and several more days before she'd talk to me. Honey Belle was one of those homeless people who'll never live indoors again because they can't tolerate walls or people or both. She was a big woman with a pale, puffy face and lots of matted gray hair. She appeared to be in her early sixties, but I'd been fooled before—living on the streets ages a person way before their time. Once she accepted the fact that I wasn't going to try to get her into a shelter, she actually became quite talkative. But it was strange talk. She was convinced that Bukka was planning to kill her.

She told me this while we were sitting in front of a plywood shack in one of the empty lots on the edge of the waterfront. A guy named Jaime had built it and lived in it; he called it Casita Riverview. Jaime was generous with coffee, food, and whatever else he managed to scavenge, and other street people gravitated around it so the shack was a good place for me to find my clients. Since they don't have beepers or

telephones or mailboxes, I have to go where they are.

It had warmed up a little. That day Jaime, Honey Belle, Randy, myself, and an old man named Spider for whom I was trying to set up a clinic appointment to get his blood pressure checked were sitting in front of the shack on a ragtag assortment of old kitchen chairs. Behind it the lower Manhattan skyline rose up from the far edge of the river like a space-age stage set.

"Bukka's a stone junkie," Jaime said contemptuously. His fingers, short and stubby like the rest of him, were rolling paper and tobacco with great tenderness and precision. "He might whack his mama for some scag, but he wouldn't kill you, Honey Belle, 'cause you ain't got no junk."

Honey Belle looked at him with complete disbelief, and Spider flipped his hand in a motion of dismissal. "Honey Belle always got someone gonna kill her. Wouldn't recognize her otherwise." He took a swig from a bottle of wine that went everywhere he did and held it out, but there were no takers. He was so gnarled-looking that he put me in mind of a burl on a winter tree, skeletal and spare. Jaime offered the paper and tobacco around. Randy accepted, and for a while his fingers were busy tapping, tamping, and rolling. Carefully he brushed the bits of tobacco from his pants, lit up, took a deep drag, and studied the cloud-covered sky, his eyes half closed.

"There be two kinds of junkies," he said in a soft, dreamy voice. "One kind falls in love with it from the first hit and never loves nothin'

so much in his whole life again, even when he ain't usin'." He paused. "And the other kind uses 'cause he can't help himself. But he hates it, and hates himself and everyone else 'cause he blames them for the fact that he uses. That's Bukka."

Randy had once told me that he'd been lost to the streets for a long time when he was young. I believed it was his way of letting me know he was an ex-junkie. I wondered a lot about Randy. He kept his personal life pretty much to himself. As I kept mine to myself. It was a funny kind of relationship. We understood each other without ever needing to put it into words. I knew precisely when to pour his coffee from the big urn in the van and just how to fix it—light and sweet. I get cold easily, and he was always there with a sweater exactly at the moment I was about to start shivering, without my ever having to ask. Once, when the heater in the van wasn't working, he found an old blow dryer in the garbage, fixed it up, and carefully warmed each of my chilled fingertips. But what I knew about Randy's life I knew mostly from hints that he dropped here and there and from what other people told me.

A tug towing a barge that was three times its length made its laborious way up the river with a group of gulls swooping and screaming in its wake. Jaime took a long drag on his cigarette and stated firmly, "I won't let Bukka round here. He'd steal me blind."

"He was trying to sneak up on me the other night," Honey Belle declared. Her hand went to the pock-

et of the torn man's jacket she was wearing. "But I got me a knife. And I'm gonna use it on him, don't think I won't." She rubbed the pocket.

"I hear he's taken up with Ana Skana," Spider said. This was directed towards Randy and was tinged with malice. "Papa Skana ain't too happy about it."

I glanced at Randy, but he seemed intent on the river. Ana Skana was the only daughter of a bigwig in the Russian Mafia, which had been gradually taking over drugs and prostitution in the neighborhood. Their name was actually Skanov, but Papa Skana was what everyone called him and Ana Skana was what they called her. Papa was reputed to love his daughter even more than he loved the joys of being a full-fledged capitalist entrepreneur. People also said she was so smart that if she'd been a boy he would've been grooming her to take over the whole operation. Jaime told me that Randy had gone out with Ana for a while, but Randy never talked to me about it.

"I killed a man once when I was living in Philly," Honey Belle announced. She took a rusted old Swiss Army knife out of her pocket and kissed it; it was missing half its red plastic handle. "Told the judge I should only get time served because the bastard had AIDS and didn't have much time left anyway."

Honey Belle? Was it true? Nobody paid any attention to her. Randy turned to Spider and said, "Willie ain't too happy 'bout it neither."

"You're best out of it," Spider de-

clared and then gave him an evil grin. "Her papa don't look too kindly at no black man sniffin' round his daughter."

"She's the one come sniffin' round every time," Jaime said. "She's got the yen for black coffee and nice dark chocolate candy."

Spider shot me a quick glance, as if he were suddenly remembering that I was white. "Now, you know I ain't prejudiced or nothin'," he said. "But it's just better if the whites and the blacks keep to their own. Less trouble all around."

I bit back an angry retort and had to remind myself he was an old man. But trouble there was. Two days later Bukka was found knifed to death in an abandoned garage.

I went looking for Willie and found him in Lonnie's bar, sitting alone in a back booth. A glass half full of something amber-colored rested on the table in front of him. The Gibson was in his hands. I slipped into the seat across from him.

He was jamming the blues, the long, bony fingers of his left hand twisting and pulling at the strings till the guitar sounded like it was howling in pain. I knew the song was one of Gully's, but I couldn't remember the name.

"Willie?" I said softly.

He looked up at me and then cried out, agony in his voice, "Now who I got?" He played a few more bars of the song and said, "Was all supposed to be his."

I put my hand on his arm, but he shook me off. "I know you just trying to help, but some things ain't no help for."

Out of nowhere came a vision of

my mother in her spotlessly clean gray wool coat, sitting as straight and as silent as a lamppost on a bench in the little concrete park where she dutifully took me to play when I was a little girl. Even now I can feel her body tighten with fear every time I'd leave her side. It was as though she believed I'd run off into the sandbox and disappear forever. I wished then I could've had another mother. I wished now I could've thrown my arms around her neck and reassured her. But it all went unspoken, her thoughts and mine. You're so right, Willie, I thought. There are some things ain't no help for.

"If you need anything, Willie, help with funeral arrangements or anything at all, just let me know." He nodded dumbly. For the first time since I'd met him, he looked like an old, old man.

The police were around, questioning everyone on the streets, and Honey Belle disappeared again. Even Randy couldn't find her. Three days after Bukka's murder he and I were sitting in front of Casita Riverview. The wind was up, churning the river into angry pewter waves, and everyone was huddled into their clothes. Bukka's murder was the main topic of conversation.

"Do you think Honey Belle killed him, like she said she was gonna do?" Spider asked. He was rubbing his ankles; they were swollen again. He saw me looking at them.

"Spider . . ." I began.

"I know, I know, the doctor," he said. We'd had this conversation before. "I can't go now. It's too cold."

I rolled my eyes at him—there was always a new reason why now wasn't quite the right time. He turned away from me, towards Jaime. "Police be around asking 'bout her. You don't think she done it, do you?"

"Honey Belle is a woman, right?" Jaime said. "Women always got their left-turn signals on in a right-turn-only lane."

"It was Papa Skana done it." A small, wiry Latino whose name I didn't know stated this with complete assurance. "But he's got the cops in his pocket, so it'll never be laid on him."

"Even so, cops gotta come up with someone," Jaime said. "They be looking to one of us."

Randy had a pack of cigarettes in his hand and was shaking one out. He suddenly stiffened, and I followed his eyes. Ana Skana was coming up the block, her blonde hair blowing around her face and her long black leather coat whipping around her ankles. We watched as she raised the broken piece of chain-metal fencing that was supposed to keep us away from the river, ducked under it, and picked her way through the rubble-filled lot to Casita Riverview. Nobody said a word.

She wasn't pretty with her off-center nose, her rather long face and slightly crooked teeth. The attraction was in her personality, something you kept trying to figure out about her until you realized she was way ahead of you and you were trailing along in her wake. Or maybe it was strictly an animal thing. Men instinctively smoothed their hair down in her presence.

She stopped in front of Randy and

put her hands on her hips. "If you wanted me back so bad, baby, all you had to do was ask."

Her voice was throaty, almost hoarse, and once you heard it you never forgot it. Randy stared at her, and the rest of us stared at him. His dark skin began to darken further. For a moment their eyes locked, but if she was waiting for a response from him, it didn't happen. Her mouth twisted as if a nerve behind her carefully painted lips had suddenly come alive. Then she turned on her heel and went back exactly the way she'd come.

There was a shocked silence.

"Guess you be the one them Skanas picked out for the cops to lay it on," Spider said gleefully. "She tell it to them detectives like that, you be in Rikers before you can whip it out to take a pee."

Randy, who was usually the personification of cool, looked like he'd been knocked down by a truck. He didn't speak at all until we were back in the van. He started the engine but didn't put it into gear. Then he said in a voice so low I could hardly hear him, "They say the only things in life that can mess your mind up big-time are the things you love."

When he didn't continue, I said, "Randy, you know how much I respect you and our friendship, and that means all we've never talked about as well as what we have. That won't change. But if there's anything you want to talk about now . . ."

For a moment he stared out of the windshield. It had started to rain, the angry drops turning the

broken pavement the color of soggy ashes. Then he said, "Never had no one much 'cept myself." His lips tightened, and I thought he wasn't going to go on. "My daddy was a junkie and a no-account. My mama tried, but she just couldn't take care of us all. Come home from school one day, guess I was about eight years old, and she was gone." He said it totally without pity; it was simply a fact. "My first real girlfriend was scag, and I was blind in love. You understand what I'm sayin'?" When I nodded, he said, "But I couldn't call my soul my own any more, and I knew I had to kick it or I'd be dead." The rain was sliding down the windshield in sheets now, making the river, the empty lot, the broken fence look like something seen through rippled glass. "I been clean now for over eight years, though there ain't one single day in my life that I don't wake up missin' it."

He took a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "And then she come along." I knew he could only mean Ana Skana. "But with her I saw it coming, and I thought I could get away before she took me over too bad." He grimaced. "Compared with her, scag was a preacher's wife."

"Randy, can they really pin this on you?"

At first he didn't answer. Then he said, "I'm a black man. I can't prove I was somewhere else. What chance I got? Them folks can do anything they want to." He glanced quickly at me, then away. "I done time, you know."

No. I didn't know, I thought. "I'll

call Howie Wiener." Howie was the lawyer who worked pro bono for some of our clients.

Randy shrugged. "Maybe he can find Honey Belle; she's the one looking to whack Bukka." He smiled a little. "Though how she coulda done it with that itty bitty knife of hers, I don't know."

Sure enough, Randy was arrested the next day. I called Howie and then went looking for Willie to see how he was doing.

He was in Lonnie's again with a drink in front of him and the Gibson in his hands. He was still jamming that song of Gully's, playing the basic twelve bars over and over again with different emphases, different rhythms, sometimes going into the melody, sometimes playing around it. His eyes were far away.

"Willie?"

Slowly he brought them back into the bar and found me.

"Are you okay?"

He just stared at me for a minute, as if trying to place who I was. Then, as if he were continuing a conversation he was already in the midst of, he said, "Gully used to tell me the blues is the blues wherever you are. But I found that ain't so. The blues up North here is different than the blues Gully and them Delta bluesmen used to sing. Them blues was jook joint blues and cottonfield blues. Not the kind of blues they got up here." His eyes flickered with some deep feeling. "But I figured I'd sing 'em the way Gully did and Bukka'd learn 'em that way, and so them ol' blues'd sing on. Now, when I die, them blues'll die with me 'cause there ain't no one

left to sing 'em." He sounded more angry than sad.

Again I thought of my mother. I sighed deeply. When she died last year of an aneurysm, she was sixty-eight years old. All those losses that she couldn't or wouldn't talk about, that never had a voice so there was never any way to release or expel them. She could only carry them around like a dead child in her belly.

There was nothing I could do for Willie. I went home, put Gully's album on my ancient turntable, lay down on my daybed, and closed my eyes. The music of my mother's blues ran around in my head like a maimed and wounded animal. I wished I could've sung them for her, but she hadn't left me any words.

Gully's voice came through my speaker with the scratchiness of a long-gone time:

*"Jailhouse ain't no plaything,
believe me,
Lord, Lord, ain't no lie."*

So much left unsaid between my mother and me, and there was no help for it now. And I sure couldn't help Willie. And there was Randy in jail. For a long time I lay there thinking about jail and the prison my mother's life had been. After a while I became aware that the record had come to an end. I turned it over and lay back down again, feeling wretched. Thinking about my mother got me nowhere. I pushed her out of my mind and thought about Randy. There had to be some way I could help him.

Casita Riverview . . . Randy and Ana . . . Ana standing there with her hands on her hips speaking the

words that would condemn Randy. Had Ana Skana deliberately set Randy up to take a fall for her father? I thought about it a little more. Would Papa Skana really have killed Bukka because he didn't want his daughter going out with a black man? If so, why hadn't he killed Randy or any of the other black men Ana had dated? It didn't make sense. No, if Papa Skana had killed Bukka or had him killed, it wasn't because he was going out with Ana.

*"I'd rather be alone for life
Than be that woman's man.
She done occupy my mind
Till I don't know who I am."*

Randy and Ana . . . Randy unable to say a word to her. He had left her because he was afraid she would take him over the way heroin had. Or maybe he just didn't trust love. And Ana? She had taken up with Bukka on the rebound, I thought. I couldn't see her being involved with a junkie for too long.

*"You gonna quit me baby,
Good as I been to you.
Lord, Lord, good as I been to you."*

She'd really been in love with Randy. I could see it on her face. Randy and Ana . . .

My mother and me . . . I had been collapsing under the weight of so many unspoken words, so I moved away as soon as I was old enough. And left her alone, just like she always knew I would.

The truth of that hit me in the middle of my chest like a one-twenty volt. I took several deep, painful breaths. Don't go there, I told myself. So I thought again about Ana Skana, who'd loved Randy and been left by him.

Had the purpose of her visit to Casita Riverview been to get back at him? To set him up to take the fall for her father? Or did she really believe he killed Bukka?

I kept going over it in my mind, unable to leave it alone. I had to come up with something that would save Randy. Could the murder have been drug-related? Everyone said Bukka was the kind of junkie who'd sell his mother for a fix. He could've tried to rip off the wrong person. If that were the case, Randy was done for because those crimes tended not to get solved until somebody ratted to the cops to cut a better deal for himself. No, I said to myself. There has to be another answer.

One part of my mind was still listening to the music. Now Gully was into the song Willie had been playing the last two times I saw him. "Graveyard Blues"—I remembered it now. "Went down to the graveyard, got down on my knees."

Gully sang from the plantations, the turpentine fields, the jook joints, and Jim Crow of the rural Mississippi Delta. It was hard to understand the words because he wasn't singing for my Northern ears. But unlike my mother's blues, this album came with liner notes, and the words were printed right in front of me. I read them. And then I knew.

I put on my shoes and my jacket and went back to Lonnie's. Willie was at the same table. By now his whole body was sagging. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked like a road that had come to the end of itself and was just petering out.

He was still jamming Gully's song, his fingers pulling at the mel-

ody as if it existed somewhere outside of his consciousness. I waited until he came around to the beginning again. And then I sang the words he couldn't or wouldn't sing:

*"Went down to the graveyard
Got down on my knees
Killed the only one I ever loved
Lord have mercy please."*

His eyes jerked up at me. And what I saw in them told me I was right.

"Why, Willie?" I felt very, very sad.

He sat there for a long time, his fingers working at the strings. Then he simply said, "He wanted me to give him the Gibson. But I knew he was jes' gonna sell it to buy drugs. When I told him no, he pulled a knife on me." His mouth grew hard. "I knowed that Gibson better than I knowed any person in this world, including Gully. Once, in a boxcar outside Louisville, I almost killed a man tried to steal it. And after everything I taught that boy, it meant nothing more to him than gettin' high."

His fingers jerked off the strings, and he pushed the guitar away from him. "Why didn't I jes' give it to him?" he cried out, anguish twisting through his voice. "Was gonna be his soon anyways."

"Willie," I said softly, "they've arrested Randy. You've got to tell the police."

Had he heard me? "What've I done?" he cried. His voice broke, and I could see the tears start up around the corners of his eyes. "Didn't even really fight me when I grabbed for the knife. But it was like that time in Louisville; a rage

come over me, and when it was gone, he was dead." His eyes were sick with watching it happen all over again. "I'm an old man. He coulda done me in easy. Was like he wanted me to kill him."

"Willie—" I struggled for the right words, not finding them. Never finding them.

He finished what was left in his glass and sat staring down at it. Grief was cutting new lines in his face. At last he wrenched himself back, took a creased handkerchief out of his pocket, and wiped his eyes. "Wasn't just Bukka I killed, you know. Was Gully, too."

"What do you mean, Willie?"

"Gully and his blues been living all this time, inside'a Bukka."

I didn't contradict him, but I knew he was wrong. Bukka had his own blues, and they weren't Gully's. What an irony, I thought. Bukka, raised within the rich tapestry of his great-grandfather's musical tradition, had wanted no part of it. While I, growing up under the weight of my mother's silence, had felt like—and still feel like for that matter—a piece of broken thread.

He picked up the instrument for which he'd paid such a heavy price, wrapped his fingers around the strings, and began to sing an old field song. His voice was still harsh, but now it was devoid of resonance; his face appeared blurry, less distinct. It was like watching a slow dissolve. Without Gully anchored to one end of his life and Bukka to the other, would Willie himself disappear right before my eyes?

"Done gone, Lord," he sang. "Like a turkey through the corn, Lord, with his long tail gone."

Willie wouldn't disappear. He'd go to the police, I'd see to that. Nobody would treat him harshly. After all, it was self-defense. Randy would go free.

And Bukka? "No one could play the blues the way Bukka did without knowing what suffering was all about." I'd said the words out loud, I realized.

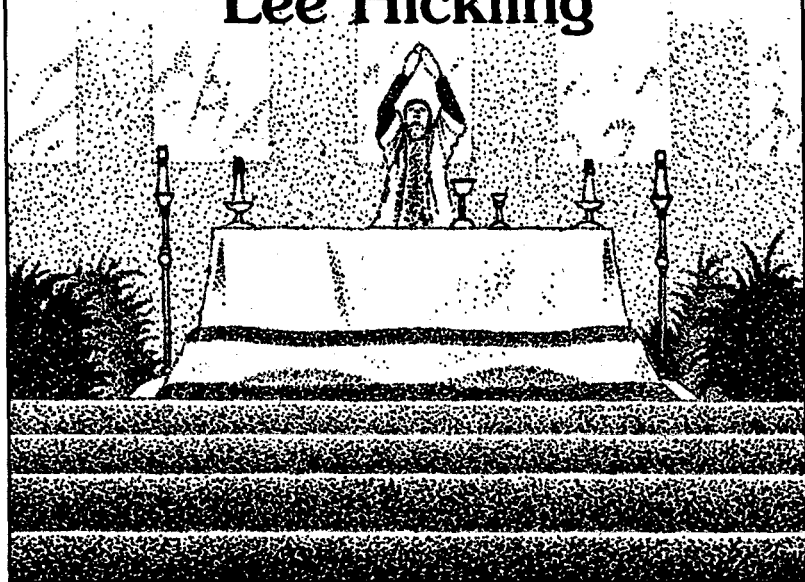
Willie stopped playing, and his whole body grew rigid. I hadn't meant to cause him any more pain. "Maybe he's in a place now where he won't suffer any more," I said. He ran his upper teeth over his bottom lip, and once again the tears collected in his eyes.

And maybe my mother is, too, I thought. For the first time since she'd died, I began to cry. It was hard to know who I was grieving for—my mother or myself.

Willie started to play again, but the rhythm had changed. It was harsher, darker, more urban. These were Bukka's blues. Without thinking about it, I began singing words to his music, the words I remembered from old records, from childhood songs, words I didn't even know I knew. My voice sounded strange, as if I were meeting it for the first time. I am no blues singer, God knows. But it didn't seem to bother Willie. He just played and sang along with me. And so we sat there together, jamming one song after another, until Lonnie kicked us out.

DEATH IN A STATE OF GRACE

Lee Hickling



The sacristy door flew open with a bang. A tall, very thin old woman stood there swaying slightly, clutching the door frame to keep from falling.

Her hair was uncombed, and what she had left of it stuck out in wisps. A cotton dress hung on her in ballooning folds, as if it had been bought when her weight matched her rawboned height. Around her shoulders was slung a shabby cloth coat.

Her face was bright red, and she was sweating profusely. "Feel sick," she said. "So sorry," and collapsed, slowly and majestically, like a tree at the final stroke of a logger's axe.

She landed facedown on the flagstone floor, and Olivia Moffett, the cathedral's director of volunteers, knelt beside her. If there was a pulse, it was very faint.

"Get my coat from the rack," she told Susan McNally, the Altar Guild volunteer that morning. "It's

the black one. Right. Now help me roll her over. Put the coat over her, and tuck it in. Good. Would you get some handtowels, roll them up, and put them under her head for a pillow?"

She phoned cathedral security. "We have an unconscious woman in the sacristy. She seems to be quite ill. Please get an ambulance here right away. In the meantime, could you send us an officer to help move her? Oh, and would you see if Mrs. Mercer, the nurse at St. Barnabas' School, can come over here?"

"It's probably a cardiac episode," the nurse said when she arrived. "Although it could be a stroke. I can't tell, and I'm afraid there's nothing I can do, really. She needs to get to an emergency room right away. Do you know who she is?"

"I saw her at the eight o'clock service," Susan said. "I think I've seen her a couple of times before. Don't you suppose she lives in the neighborhood?"

On the floor outside the sacristy Olivia found a large leather shoulder bag, worn and scratched, with a broken snap, but expensive once. It was stuffed to bursting with used tissues, pamphlets from the tract rack in the narthex, five bottles of aspirin, all opened, each with only a few pills gone, city bus transfers, paperback books, newspaper clippings, a hairbrush, two combs, and a double handful of change, mostly pennies. In an outside pocket were a Medicare card, an American Express card, and a letter postmarked Machiasport, Maine.

"Her name is Patience Trudeau," Olivia said. "She seems to have a

niece in Maine. The address on this letter is 4637 Genevra Street. That's only about a block from here, isn't it? Susan, if Canon Gebler is in her office, would you ask her to come tell us whether this poor woman is one of her flock?"

The Reverend Canon Gertrude Harrington-Gebler was the Missioner to what the dean, the Very Reverend Thomas Taylor Carleton, liked to call the cathedral's physical community. An Episcopal cathedral is not a parish and isn't supposed to have a congregation of its own, but there are always people who don't understand that and insist on regarding it as their church.

Harrington-Gebler's job description had two parts, to be their pastor and to try to find ways to get the cathedral involved with the problems and needs of its neighborhood.

There was a lot to get involved with. The cornerstone of the Cathedral Church of St. Barnabas had been laid in the early 1920's on a twelve acre site at the edge of the city's old downtown. Around it on three sides was a residential neighborhood that people in the twenties probably would have described as ritzy.

Now most downtown stores and offices were gone, fled to the suburbs. The big brownstone apartment buildings and once-grand houses on the streets over which the cathedral towered were rental properties, their tenants people who needed to live where rent was low and a bus stop handy. Quite a few were pensioners who filled part of their empty days with services and programs at the cathedral. Oli-

via supposed Mrs. Patience Trudeau was one of those.

The Reverend Canon, a brisk, square-jawed, square-shouldered young woman with a Prince Valiant bob, arrived just as the emergency medical team rolled Mrs. Trudeau out on a collapsible gurney. She confirmed the identification.

"Yes, she's one of our SOALs. She was here for the eight o'clock Mass even though she's nominally Roman, and she's been a regular for the hot lunch almost every day for two months. A widow, I believe. She's been going to Brother Tim's Wednesday morning prayer and Bible study group."

She straightened her suit jacket and dickey with the air of a woman whose time was being wasted. "The only thing I know about her really is that Tim once mentioned she was terminally ill. Some kind of malignancy. I warned him he'd better not try his faith-healing crap with her. What happened, did she just keel over?"

Olivia hated the word SOALs, which was cathedral staff jargon for Sick, Old, And Lonelies, and she wasn't overfond of Canon Harrington-Gebler either. When Edward was alive, she'd grumbled to him that Canon Gert had mistaken her vocation because she was obviously born to be General Patton. Now there was no one to whom she could say such things.

The next morning she heard that Mrs. Trudeau had been dead on arrival at Halley Memorial Hospital. Before the day was over she'd forgotten about the tall old woman

who had apologized before she collapsed on the floor of the sacristy to die.

One evening a few weeks later Olivia worked late. She did that often because there was no one but her cats waiting for her to come home. It was nearly ten when she was through, and the west front doors were locked. She'd have to go out the south door of the transept.

She always felt tiny and vulnerable when she walked down the center aisle of the great nave after dark. Groined arches met in the shadows six stories over her head like the canopy of a strange, ancient forest that had been magicked into stone. Streetlights outside the tall stained-glass windows threw patches of varicolored light here and there without relieving the enormous space of any of its gloom. She quickened her steps.

The guard at the door knew her. "Mrs. Moffett, did you hear any more about the old lady who died?" he said as he unlocked one of the doors.

"Why, no. Not since that day. Four or five weeks ago, wasn't it? Why do you ask?"

The guard looked puzzled. "Four or five weeks? No, I mean the one today, who died during Evensong. Didn't you hear about that?"

All he knew about the woman was that she was named Kinsey or Kinsley. After the midweek Choral Evensong and Eucharist someone tried to wake her and found she was not asleep in her wheelchair, but dead.

"She was a really old lady," the guard said. "I guess it was a heart

attack or something, don't you think?"

Olivia said oh my, she certainly didn't know, and thanked him for letting her out. Next morning Brother Timaeus, who always had the latest news, told her the woman was a SOAL named Edna Kienzle who had diabetes, arthritis, osteoporosis, high blood pressure, and a very bad heart. The only question was which of her illnesses had taken her off.

Services in the cathedral never felt to Olivia like going to church, and she seldom went to one unless she had to. Everything happened so far away, so dwarfed by the scale of the place that it was a performance, a show, and not something she could feel involved in. But the feast day of St. Barnabas, the cathedral's own saint, was a major event every June eleventh. Everyone on the cathedral and diocesan staffs was expected to be there and to sit at the front of the balcony over the north transept.

Feeling put upon, Olivia found a place in the "Reserved for Staff" section and sat down, speaking to no one. The prelude was an antiphonal setting of the 117th Psalm, *Laudate Dominum*, with the Cathedral Choir on one side of the choir, the Boys' Choir on the other, and an orchestra of thirty string, brass, and percussion players from the City Symphony. At the great organ was its composer, Canon Precentor Septimus Alan Arthur, DSM, call me Doctor Arthur, if you please.

Olivia considered him a pompous little twit, but he had written a gor-

geous piece of music and it seduced her out of her mood. When it was over, she felt like applauding, but of course that was never done.

The organ augmented by a brass trio signaled the processional hymn. Gravely pacing two abreast, down the center aisle came crucifers, flammifers, acolytes carrying banners, lay readers and chalcists, officers of diocesan organizations, postulants, deacons, and most of the clergy of the diocese in full vestments, all in ritual order with the most unimportant in the lead.

After them, in copes and miters, came Suffragan Bishop Arthur Ed-
dison, retired diocesan Jerome Coffey, still erect and hale at eighty-two, and finally the Ordinary himself, Davis Knowles, in the place of honor. For the last shall be first and the first last.

Naturally, the service was far too long. During Bishop Knowles' homily Olivia took refuge in daydreaming. When lines began to form for communion she didn't feel like joining one and stayed in her seat.

She'd become so thoroughly detached from everything around her that at first she didn't notice there was some kind of trouble at the communion station down in the south transept, even though it was straight across from where she sat.

It was a quiet sort of commotion, dignified and thoroughly Anglican, only a small whirlpool in the sea of human heads that filled the nave. Craning as far as she could without standing up to look over the balcony rail, Olivia saw at the center of the eddy someone lying on the floor.

A baldheaded man in a white sur-

plice was kneeling there. No, not bald, tonsured. Brother Timaeus. Standing beside him was Canon Gertrude Harrington-Gebler holding a paten of wafers in her right hand and looking helpless, an expression so uncharacteristic for her that Olivia almost smiled.

Suddenly she felt chilly and frightened. Not another one. No, Lord. Don't let it be.

When three cathedral security guards lifted the person on the floor by the knees and shoulders, she could see it was an old man. As they carried him down the south aisle toward the narthex, she left the balcony quietly, went down two long flights of winding stone stairs, walked the length of the undercroft, and climbed the stairway to the verger's office.

As she'd guessed, that was where the man had been taken. Jared Atwell's assistant, Jimmy Sharif, was outside.

"Is that old man dead?" she asked.

Sharif's Levantine face was somber. "There's a doctor in there now. He looked dead to me. No breathing, no pulse. Funny thing is, he seemed to be stiffening up. Doesn't that take several hours?"

"Did anyone know him?"

Yes, Brother Timaeus and Canon Gebler both did because he was one of the SOALs.

Olivia didn't sleep well that night, so she stayed in bed the next morning until almost eight thirty. It was past ten thirty when she reached her office and found her desk blanketed with pink telephone message slips. Two were from Jared Atwell. Can you see me as soon as you get

in? She swept the others into a stack, put her coffee cup on them, and went to the verger's office.

Atwell was sitting by a window, feet up on the sill, reading a newspaper. "I am compelled," he said, not bothering to say good morning, "to begin every day by slowly ingesting three poisonous substances to which I am addicted. Caffeine, nicotine, and the *Morning Record-Star*. May I offer you some?" He passed her a section of the paper, folded to an inside page.

She refilled his coffee cup, poured herself one, lighted a cigarette, and looked at the page. Near the bottom a three inch story was headed WORSHIPPER, 73, DIES AT CATHEDRAL. A subhead said RETIRED CITY ENGINEER VICTIM OF STROKE.

Victor H. Budlong had been pronounced dead on arrival at Halley Memorial Hospital of an apparent cerebral hemorrhage. A widower, he had worked in the city engineer's office for forty-three years, had been in poor health, survivors included . . .

"When they say 'apparent cerebral hemorrhage,' what does that mean?" she asked. "Do they do some tests or an autopsy or anything?"

Atwell looked at her over his coffee mug, smiling faintly. "I asked myself the same question. Am I the only one who's getting a little uncomfortable? Did the *Star's* religion writer, dear, earnest little Millicent Woodcock, miss the real story? 'Third Cathedral Post-Communion Death in Six Weeks.' And what a great follow-up feature she could write. 'Are Sacraments at St. Barnabas' Hazardous to One's Health?'"

"Oh, Jed, stop," Olivia said. "It is disturbing to have such things happen, but the man was old and apparently quite ill, like the other two, and it can't be anything but a series of coincidences."

"Once is an accident," Atwell said. "Twice is coincidence. The third time is enemy action."

She looked at him sharply. Edward used to say that. She waited for him to go on.

"I hadn't given the matter any thought," he said gravely, "and I would have agreed with you except for something I read by chance this morning. I came in early to clear my desk, which I do once or twice a year whether it needs it or not, and found this in one of the piles of ecclesiastical litter that I accumulate."

It was a sheaf of eight by ten pages stapled into a booklet with heavy, soft-purple covers. "I was about to pitch it into the wastebasket when for some reason I leafed through it and spotted a familiar name. After I read the relevant part, I began to get a little edgy. Let's see whether it affects you the same way."

She looked at the title: *House of Bishops Subcommittee on Human Affairs and Health. Transcript of hearing on resolutions dealing with artificial prolongation of life, living wills, and related subjects.*

"You're very nearly the only person around here whose opinion I would value," Atwell said. "The rest, from the dean on down, or up, are all too flaky and erratic."

"Unworldly would be a kinder word," Olivia said.

"Same thing. Take this home,

please. Don't read it now. Wait until you have leisure to evaluate it and reflect on it. Then tell me tomorrow what you think."

After she fed her cats and gave them both a thorough neck-scratch, she put on her robe and slippers and made a cup of tea. When she sat down to read Jared's booklet, the calico cat, Ruth, jumped up, snuggled into the crook of her free arm, and began to purr. The white cat, Naomi, sat on the floor a yard away and gave herself an elaborate bedtime bath. Curling her feet under her, Olivia began to read.

Once a year every bishop of the Episcopal Church who is still able to get on and off an airplane attends a House of Bishops meeting. The real business is to renew old friendships and enmities and to talk shop. But the men and women in purple shirts also feel compelled to tell the world where they stand on questions of the day even though the world rarely asks for their opinion. Before they decide what it is they think, they hold hearings.

The booklet the verger had given her was a transcript of one, on the rights and wrongs of keeping dying people alive with expensive and usually futile mechanical measures. One of the witnesses had been the Reverend Gertrude Gebler. Olivia looked at the date on the cover. Three years ago. That would have been about a year before Gert came to the cathedral as a canon and two years before she married quiet little Mike Harrington, the curate at suburban St. Ambrose's, and spliced his name to hers.

She turned through until she

found Gebler's testimony. A word on the facing page caught her eye: Murderer. Who was it said that?

The Venerable Ieuan Howell. She remembered him, a Welsh-born archdeacon from an upper Midwest diocese noted for its conservatism.

"The Sixth Commandment contains no escape clauses," he'd declared. "Nor did our Lord, who said he came not to destroy the old Jewish law but to fulfil it. He never at any time, directly or by implication, opened any loopholes in it. It still reads, Thou shalt do no murder, period.

"Each human life is of incalculable value. It is of God's making, and it is for Him alone to decide when it is to begin and when end. There is a word for a human being who, in his sinful pride, usurps that authority, and the word is Murderer."

Gert Gebler had taken Howell on directly.

"Not all killing is murder," she'd said. "It is a matter of intent. Lacking intent, even the ancient common law finds killing a human being to be at worst a lamentable accident and calls it manslaughter. If one kills with the intention of taking away from a fellow being something that Father Howell correctly says is 'of incalculable value,' that is murder.

"But to refuse artificially to prolong a life when all hope of recovery is gone does not take away anything of value. To the contrary, it gives a gift of incalculable worth. Have any of you sat beside a person who was being kept alive by intravenous feeding, a ventilator, and

nasal intubation, without which he or she could neither breathe nor eat, for whom there is no hope of recovery whatever?

"I have. As my mother and I sat at my father's bedside, we prayed again and again for his life to end. By the time it did, I had come to see that the process of keeping him alive had truly murdered him. It had destroyed him as a person, and robbed him of something of incalculable value—his human dignity and a fitting and peaceful death at his appointed time."

It was easy to picture Gert glaring defiantly and proclaiming by her posture, set jaw, and squared shoulders that if anyone didn't agree with what she was saying, the hell with them.

Olivia realized she was leaning forward in her chair with chilly perspiration prickling the back of her neck. There were pages more of Gert's testimony, but she'd read enough. She tossed the booklet on the coffee table, got up to make herself a drink, and surprised herself by pouring it from the bottle of thirty-year-old single malt scotch that Edward used to keep for special occasions. No one had touched it since he died.

She turned on the reading light behind his chair and sat down on the couch opposite.

"Oh, Edward," she said, "how I need your advice right now."

She pictured him there. Detective Lieutenant Edward J. Moffett, her husband for only six years. A brief, happy second marriage for both of them, cut brutally short by a sixteen-year-old crazed on PCP.

Edward had given his gun to another officer and was approaching the boy, hands outstretched, palms up, trying to persuade him to put down his .357 Magnum revolver.

Tonight he would have been in his shirtsleeves, his shoes off, lighting and relighting his pipe, looking concerned and anxious to help if he could. A big, kind man whose gentle, vaguely academic manner made people surprised to learn he was a veteran cop.

She said aloud what she would have said to him. "I need to sort out what I fear from what I know, Edward. To get it straight in my mind."

What would he have answered? *Well, Livvie, what do you know for sure? Three old people collapsed and died soon after receiving communion. All three were SOALs, and all three were terminally ill. Anything else?*

"Oh yes. They had all just received a communion wafer from Canon Gebler, who believes passionately in mercy killing."

So?

"Well, I'd never have thought anything about that, but Jed Atwell, when he gave me that transcript, said something you used to say, and it keeps haunting me. Once an accident, twice a coincidence . . ."

Third time, enemy action.

He looked around for an ashtray, but there was none on the end table by his chair. Automatically she got up and started toward the china closet to get one.

Halfway there, she froze. Good Lord, what am I doing? Am I turning into a loony old woman?

She turned to go back to the couch

and saw him there, smiling, holding his pipe and rummaging for matches in his shirt pocket.

Her legs failed her, and she sank to her knees on the carpet. "Oh dear God," she said. "Is this what an hallucination is like?"

Hallucination? Why did you say that?

"Because you can't be here. You can't be here really."

Livvie, I'm often here. You just never saw me before. I don't know why you do tonight, but I'm glad. You said you needed me for some reason, and here I am.

"No," she said breathlessly. "No, you can't be. I must have fallen asleep, and I'm dreaming."

All right. If it makes you feel less frightened, let's say that's what is happening. He put his pipe down on the endtable, unlighted.

And if you are asleep, before you wake up let me tell you my reaction to what's been going on in your big stone barn with the pointy towers.

She rose shakily, tottered to the couch, and sank down on it. What a strange, strange dream. She fixed her eyes on his face, so familiar, so dear, so real-seeming.

He smiled at her tenderly.

To begin with, Livvie, you have no evidence whatever. Zero, zip, bupkes. Three people are dead. But they were all not only old, but quite ill, very close to death. Two of them were habitués of the cathedral, weren't they? Probably took communion several times a week? All right, then whenever and wherever they died, they'd have been to communion recently.

But let's come right out and say it:

you're wondering whether Canon Gert murdered them by poisoning.

Do you remember the three elements you need to prove murder? Means, motive, and opportunity. Let's take opportunity first. That one we've certainly got. The priest passes out the Bread, right? The wafers? Administers the Host, we used to call it at St. Theresa's when I was a kid. And you have a layperson usually to pass the Cup, the chalice. Okay, one of the wafers could have something on it. Canon Hyphenated had opportunity, I grant you.

I think we can rule out the chalice. If you drop something into the Cup at any point, it'll wipe out everyone the rest of the way around the altar rail, won't it? Not to speak of the priest or the acolyte who drains the Cup if there's any wine left after the sacrament is over. I know about that. I used to be an altar boy.

Were there autopsies? No, I didn't think there would be. Not likely when they were old and terminally ill and the circumstances of death agreed with their diseases. And you have no evidence whatever that they didn't just die suddenly of what ailed them, have you?

She shook her head.

All right. We've still got opportunity and means. But how about motive? Well, we know Canon Hyphenated is in favor, in theory, of putting a merciful end to a human life when there is nothing ahead for its possessor but increasing pain and tragic degeneration before he or she dies.

But there's a big difference between pulling a plug in a hospital

room and poisoning someone right in the cathedral. And doing it surreptitiously. You've told me about Gertrude, and I met her a couple of times. It's not her style to do anything surreptitiously, is it?

And think about this. If you took it on yourself to murder a relative stranger, would you do it in such a conspicuous, crazy way? I can't buy it, sweetheart.

"Oh, Edward, you're right, of course," she said. "But it's happened three times now. Third time, enemy action, Edward. Isn't that true?"

That was a wisecrack, not an axiom. My advice is to forget about it all, or if you can't do that at least keep your mouth shut. I suppose there's no harm in keeping your eyes and ears open, but that's absolutely all you should do.

A moment later he was no longer there. "Edward?" she said. "Oh my dear. How I wish this had really happened."

She drained her barely touched glass of Edward's scotch in two long swallows. The warmth of the whiskey going down seemed quite real. She considered pouring herself another, shook her head, set her mouth firmly, and went to bed, or dreamed that she did.

"So what do you think?" Jared Atwell said. "Is there a self-appointed instrument of God's mercy and love killing off our poor old SOALs?"

"No, Jed, I don't think so. But there's one thing I am sure of. If you say to anyone else the kind of things you said to me yesterday, it will be very damaging to the cathedral. And if that doesn't deter you, think

about what will happen when Canon Gert hears about it, and you can bet she will. She'll land on you with both feet. And then consider this: what if your suspicions turn out to be right? We might as well knock this building down and use the rubble to fill a swamp somewhere."

Atwell whistled. "And sow the site with salt? I think you're being a little extreme."

"No, I'm not. Imagine the television networks and newspapers and news magazines descending on us, to say nothing of the supermarket tabloids. In the public mind forevermore, St. Barnabas' would be the place where a woman priest murdered old folks at the altar rail."

The verger stared out the window silently. Finally he said, "But what if it really is happening? Do you want us to close our eyes and just hope it will go away? I can't settle for that. I think we've got to take steps to protect the cathedral, quietly but effectively."

Olivia sighed. "I was afraid you'd say something like that. Would it make any difference if I told you I discussed this with an experienced police detective? He said that at this point we have no legal grounds whatever for thinking these deaths were anything but natural."

Atwell was startled. "Who was it?"

She smiled. "I really can't tell you. But you can be quite certain he'll never mention it to anyone."

July passed safely, then August. By the time the last Friday in September came and there had been no more deaths, Olivia was sure there would be none.

But late that afternoon her secretary Janice returned from an errand to report, "Another one of those old people died today."

Preoccupied, Olivia hardly heard what she had said.

"What?" she asked.

"Another one of our SOALs died this afternoon, and she'd just taken communion, like all the others. I think something weird must be going on, don't you?"

Olivia tried to keep her face blank and pretended to be puzzled.

"Weird? I don't understand."

"Jimmy Sharif said a woman, one of our sick old lonelies, had some kind of convulsion and died while the community van was taking her home after the noon service and hot lunch. That makes four of them, Mrs. Moffett. That's what I meant by weird. Don't you think it is, kind of?"

Olivia said no, she didn't think that at all. More than two hundred older people came regularly to services and programs at the cathedral, and many of them were chronically ill. Of course several had died. That was quite normal.

Janice wasn't convinced. "Well, Jimmy said Mr. Atwell is very upset about it all. He said it looks funny because all of them had taken communion right before they died."

Angry but trying to hide it, Olivia told Janice that kind of talk was irresponsible and she didn't believe there was the slightest truth in it.

That night she vented her irritation in an unnecessary spasm of apartment cleaning. The trouble was, the place was too small to tire her out. At ten thirty everything

was washed or dusted, vacuumed or polished, and she found herself in the kitchen, still tense, angry, and wide awake.

Oh, Edward, she thought. I miss everything about you, but I think what I miss most of all is just sitting and listening to you talk. In the evenings they had rarely turned on the television, and although they read and listened to music, their main pastime had been conversation. Edward had always been genuinely interested in her job, dull though it seemed to her, and she never tired of hearing him tell about his cases.

When she sat down at the little kitchen table with a cup of decaffeinated tea, he sat down across from her, straddling the chair backwards as he often did.

"Edward," she said, astonished at how calmly she was able to speak. "I'm awake, aren't I?"

You look awake to me, Livvie. What's gone wrong now?

Tears blurred her vision, and she shut her eyes tight. When she opened them, he was still there, waiting.

"Edward, how can this be?"

Dear, I don't know, but I think even if I did I wouldn't be allowed to say. Why don't you just tell me what's got you so upset?

By the time she had talked herself out, she had nearly forgotten how bizarre and impossible this was. When she was through, she waited for his reaction.

My oh my, Jed Atwell has cast himself as the Great Detective, hasn't he? He's just the type to do that. What he must have thought was hey, wow, murder in the cathedral,

how terrible but how terribly intriguing. And Jimmy Sharif is perfect for the role of dull but faithful colleague.

"Exactly," she said. "And they've started everyone thinking about murder when all that's happened is obviously a series of natural deaths. Well, I can't undo his mischief, but perhaps I can help minimize the damage. What should I do?"

Probably it's gone too far for you to do much. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to have a good talk with Jared first thing Monday morning. You know, something just struck me. These deaths are all wrong for murder. The way it would have to be done is too complicated, too Byzantine, to be plausible outside a book.

"Yes," she said. "I remember what you used to say. Most people, including me, have wrong ideas about crime and police work because they got them from stories. Real murders are nothing like the ones in murder mysteries."

That's right, sweetheart. In real life murders are very rarely interesting. They're a simple, sad, dirty business in which everyone suffers. The families and friends of the victims suffer most, I suppose, but the killer suffers, too, unless he's completely insane.

Never romanticize murder by making it into a game. Even veteran police officers can fall into that trap. They start seeing themselves as Sam Spade. At that point they are sure to try to do something clever, and wind up looking stupid.

"Just as Jed has."

He nodded, smiling, and the chair where he had been was empty.

Now, don't you start crying, she told herself sternly. With tears trickling down her cheeks, she finished her tea, refilled the cats' water bowl, and went to bed. When the alarm went off at seven, she had slept nearly nine hours, but she still felt lethargic and sad.

She knew why. It wasn't safe to evoke Edward's physical presence and voice until the fantasy became so vivid it amounted to a waking dream, an hallucination. And *that* was all that had happened.

Well, it had to stop. She had lived through the denial that postpones facing a loss. When she was ready, she let herself grieve, and lived through that. Now she could remember him lovingly and be grateful for the years they'd had. She didn't want to slide all the way back into the black pit that had swallowed her up for months after his funeral.

Right. That was settled. Throwing the covers back, she had started for the kitchen to put the kettle on when the telephone rang.

"Mrs. Moffett? This is Dean Carleton's secretary. The dean would like to see you in his office at ten this morning."

No "please." No "if it's convenient." Alice, the dean's secretary, tended to act as though she were the real, if unrecognized, dean, which made her at any rate a faithful mirror of the dean's own attitudes. The Very Rev was upset about something and Olivia thought she knew what. But why did he want to talk to her about it?

"May we begin now?" T. Taylor

Carleton said without preliminaries. He, Jared Atwell, Jimmy Sharif, and the Reverend Canon Gertrude Harrington-Gebler were already at the table in the dean's conference room when Olivia arrived.

Only Sharif said good morning to her. Atwell nodded glumly. Gebler said nothing, but she didn't need to. Her face proclaimed what she had to say, and it was a declaration of righteous fury. The dean of the Cathedral Church of St. Barnabas was tall, lean, and whitehaired, with the face of an aging leading man and the voice and mannerisms to match. As Edward had said once, there was far less to Dean Carleton than met the eye.

Olivia resented his implying that she'd been holding the others up. She had, in fact, arrived two minutes early. But that was exactly like him. Fussy and phony.

"It has come to my attention," he declaimed, "that a few senior members of the cathedral staff have been spreading distressing, in fact scandalous, and I am quite certain totally unfounded, gossip. I have called this meeting in order to put a definitive period to such thoroughly irresponsible behavior."

Gertrude Gebler nodded grimly as he went on. Olivia had become fairly adept at translating what the dean said into plain English, so she was able to infer how she had been drawn into this long before Carleton finished his oration.

Just as she and Edward had supposed, Atwell and Sharif had been gumshoeing clumsily around, imagining themselves to be unraveling a British whodunit. They had been

so coy and over-clever that they'd dropped broad hints of their titillating suspicions to everyone they interviewed. Naturally someone had told Gebler, who had confronted them.

They had compounded their sins by invoking Olivia's name without explaining what she had really said. That was unforgivable! She seethed until her temper had grown to match Canon Gebler's and she could stand it no longer.

"All right!" she said loudly. "I have a few things I want to say before this foolishness goes any further!"

The others goggled. The dean stopped in mid-sentence, his mouth open and his next polysyllable dying stillborn in it.

"Jared, I want you to know that I'm furious at you for casting me as your third Stooge. You know very well that when we talked about these deaths I told you there was absolutely no reason to believe that they were other than natural and advised you very strongly to keep your suspicions to yourself.

"Canon Gebler, I assure you that this was the stand I took, and that what has been going on only came to my attention late Friday. I strongly deplored it and said so to the person who retailed this nonsense to me. I was almost as angry then as I am now, and I resolved to do whatever I could, starting this very morning, to put a stop to it.

"And, Dean Carleton, in addition to what I just said to the others, I want to say to you that I am very disappointed that you would summarily judge me, in my absence, to

be as foolish and irresponsible as Jed and Jimmy have been."

She paused for breath and realized she'd said all she needed to say. There was a long, long silence.

The dean, who had closed his mouth, opened it again a little uncertainly. "Well. I guess that clears the air to a certain extent. Now, what are we going to do?"

When it was over, the dean had been dissuaded from holding a general staff meeting or even issuing a memo to quench the gossip. Either one, Canon Gebler argued with Olivia's support, would only give the stories more currency. Instead, a glum Jed and a chastened Jimmy had agreed that they would retrace their steps and assure everyone they had talked to that they were now sure there had been no basis for their suspicions. "Starting a backfire," Canon Gebler called it.

Outside, she stopped Olivia for a moment.

"Thank you for your support," she said. "If we can stifle the irresponsible rumor-mongering now, I hope we can put this all behind us. There aren't likely to be any more SOALs dying for a while. I took the trouble to check up on the health of the whole group, and I was relieved to find that they're a pretty healthy lot.

"Out of two hundred and six, only two might be called waiting to die, which is really a remarkably low percentage. One is Henry Havelock, a widower, a retired policeman with a very bad heart. He could pop off at any moment. The other one is Mrs. Veronica Baker, whom you may have noticed because she's so

terribly obese. She's had surgery for lymph node cancers, and the other morning she told me it's begun spreading again."

The dean had solemnly sworn them all to secrecy, quite literally, but somehow one other person found out what had gone on in the dean's office. On Monday Brother Timaeus sat down next to Olivia in the lunchroom and said, "I certainly appreciate the way you defended Canon Gebler. She'd never do what people were saying she had."

Oh hell, hell, hell, Olivia thought. Either Atwell or Jimmy Sharif has been talking. Jed would be too embarrassed to mention it, wouldn't he? It was Jimmy.

Tim was short for Timaeus and also for Brother Timaeus' original name. After some kind of religious experience in a narcotics treatment center, Timothy Conklin, a former nightclub performer, had ordained himself a "lay brother" and changed his name. He'd turned up at the cathedral several years ago and, by being willing to help anybody do anything, had gradually become an unofficial, unpaid member of the staff. The dean and most of the canons didn't care for his appearance—bearded, tonsured, and clad in sandals and a burlap robe with a rope cincture. But he worked so earnestly, humbly, and energetically at menial tasks that nobody had the heart to drive him away.

"I don't think we should discuss this here," she said. "Or anywhere else, for that matter."

Brother Tim glanced around covertly. "No one can hear us. I just

wanted to tell you why I never believed what people are saying about Canon Gebler. She told me once that she'd changed her mind about what she used to think. She said she still believes it's not wrong to help end someone's life when all they have to look forward to is pain and suffering and they're going to die soon anyway. But then she said something no one else has even mentioned, and I think it's strange that they haven't."

He leaned closer. "She said it was too great a responsibility even for a priest, helping someone else die, because there's no way of knowing they're really ready to go. Which is the most important thing, right? Whether we've repented our sins and accepted the Lord's forgiveness? I mean, we have to be right with Him when we go because that's what decides our eternal fate."

If Dean Carleton could have had his way in all things, there would have been no Halloween party at the cathedral. He hated Halloween. It was a barbarous survival of pagan rituals, thoroughly out of place in a house of divine worship on the eve of All Saints' Day.

Gert Gebler had argued for the party because it helped her recruit youngsters for her youth programs. Bishop Knowles had overruled the dean for once, and the party had become the year's major event at the cathedral as far as neighborhood children were concerned.

Olivia's role in it was small. She had to find four or five volunteers to serve cider, cocoa, doughnuts, cookies, and popcorn, and a registered

nurse willing to stand by, to satisfy the dean's final quibble about insurance.

One of the cider-and-doughnut ladies called at the last minute. She was terribly sorry, but she couldn't make it after all. Olivia decided it would take less effort to fill the gap herself than to find a replacement.

The party was in the west end of the nave. All Hallows' Eve was on a Saturday this year, and the east end was filled with folding pews, ready for three services the next morning. Children began to arrive an hour before it was supposed to start. Their costumes fascinated Olivia. Most were mass-produced toystore and discount house junk, cheap cloth suits with plastic masks representing the current pantheon of pre-teen heroes.

The great church echoed with the screams and shouts of Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, Spidermen, Frankensteins, Darth Vaders, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles chasing each other and falling down. She wondered why their mothers had bought them such trash, shoddy but far from cheap.

Not all were that bad. There were several in costumes made at home *con amore*, with skill and imagination. A fairytale princess in a tiara and a dress with a train, so lovely her spangles and rhinestones should have been real diamonds. A robot who buzzed and flashed his eyes as he teetered from foot to foot, staying so perfectly in character that one forgot there was a small child inside the aluminum-painted cardboard carapace.

A Dracula in full evening dress,

skin artfully made up in palest green, lips blood-red, eyes heavily shadowed with blue-black, was so convincing that when he lifted his cape to make bat wings and bared his plastic fangs, the little girls ran squealing away.

The normal schedule was games first, then the costume contest, and last the food. This year, though, Canon Gebler was trying a new tactic to get the youngsters quiet and seated in rows on the floor—a clown magician.

He even appeared magically, popping out from behind one of the great pillars although no one had seen him there a moment before. Waddling through the crowd in the toes-out shuffle that a clown's huge shoes enforce, he mounted the three steps to a little stage and tripped on the top one.

Turning the fall into a neat somersault, he rolled to his feet and began to perform a series of card flourishes, sending a deck of cards racing up one of his arms from the wrist to the shoulder, crawling around behind his neck and cascading down the other arm. Then he stretched both arms and began pouring the cards across from one hand to the other in fantastic waterfalls. He froze in an applause-cue attitude, and the children obediently cheered. Delighted, he grinned and bowed, spreading his arms wide to accept the applause and, as he did, turning one hand over. When he straightened up, the cards fell and accordioned ludicrously, giving away the trick.

Everything the poor clown tried to do went artfully wrong. Patient-

ly he kept trying to perform his miracles, and every one turned into a hilarious disaster. Olivia found herself loving it as much as the children.

"Who is that?" she asked Dorothy Farrell, who was presiding over the popcorn table. "I've never seen a funnier act anywhere. Did they hire a local magician?"

"Oh, you know him," Dorothy said. "That's our own Brother Tim. Didn't you know he used to be a professional magician? He had a mind-reading act that he did in nightclubs, and I heard he was actually a big name once upon a time."

"I knew he'd been a nightclub performer," Olivia said. "But I don't believe I ever knew what he did exactly."

The clown had produced a stack of oversized cards almost a foot across from a pocket somewhere in his vast baggy pants. Fanning them, he showed everybody their faces. Four kings, four queens, four jacks, and one joker. Laboriously (they were big), he shuffled them and fanned them again, facedown, urging in pantomime that a child in front pick one and hold it up for everybody to see. It was the joker.

Delighted, the clown took it back and shuffled the big cards again. Was that supposed to be a trick? No, he fanned the cards and had another child pick. It was the joker again. Doing a joyful little dance, he shuffled once more and had a third child choose one. The joker again!

Playing small pantomime jokes as he went, he proceeded to a fourth child, a fifth, and finally to Dracula. Streetwise, the child refused to

take a card. "Let me shuffle first!" he demanded. The clown shrugged and let him do it, then took the cards back and fanned them. The little count spent a long time deciding which card he wanted, but when he finally took one, again it was the joker.

Capering in triumph, the clown fanned the cards face out to show that, yes, there was only one joker. But they were all jokers! Acting crushed at the revelation, he shuffled them hastily and showed them again. Kings, queens, jacks, and only one joker.

He did a little dance of joy, bowed so low he nearly fell on his face. Then, splay-footed and bowlegged, he waddled toward the High Altar in the distance.

As he went, he threw the big cards one by one, edge on, into the air ahead of him. Looping like boom-crangs, they all came straight back so he could catch them.

While maintenance men were cleaning and setting up the nave for the regular Saturday Evensong and Eucharist, Olivia went looking for Tim and found him in the hall outside the vestry.

He'd taken off his whiteface and changed into slacks and a sweater. She'd never seen him except in his burlap robe and sandals. Apart from the tonsure he looked like a normal person. "I had to shave my beard for the show," he said. "I have a registered clown face, you know. I can't put it on when I have a beard, so I decided to shave. I can always grow it again."

"It was astonishing the way you made the youngsters choose the jok-

er no matter what they did," she said. "I'd love to know how you did it, but I know better than to ask."

"Right," he said. "Magicians are sworn not to tell. Well, not sworn, actually, but it's their professional code. Never do the same trick twice for the same audience. Never explain how a trick was done. I can tell you, though, that I didn't use any gimmicks. It was a pure sleight-of-hand move, the classic old fashioned force. I'm proud of doing everything that way. Few magicians have ever mastered the old forces."

"What's a force?"

"There are basically two ways of doing a card location, which is what you call it when you find a chosen card in a deck. One is to keep track of a card that someone has freely chosen. There are tons of methods for doing that. The other way is to make them choose the one you want them to have, and there are gadgets for doing that.

"There's also the classic way, and it's hard to do. It takes a lot of experience and a kind of sixth sense. The idea is that when they reach for a card, you sway your body imperceptibly to bring the one you want them to take right between their fingers. Kids are hard to pull that off with. Several times I had to do some stunt or sight gag to break off and move to another kid because I could see that the one I had was going to insist on taking a wrong card."

"It still sounds like magic to me. I mean real magic. Can you do it with anything besides cards?"

"Oh sure. Coins. Handkerchiefs in a bunch—silks, you know. Almost anything can be forced, with

practice. Excuse me, Mrs. Moffett. I'm a chalice tonight, and I have to go and vest. I'm glad you liked the show."

A few of the mothers and children stayed for Evensong. Among the children was the little Dracula. Olivia wondered whimsically whether he'd decline the communion Cup with Lugosi's line, "Thank you—I never drink . . . wine."

When the queues formed for communion, she found herself in the center one bound for the main altar rail, right behind the little count and his mother. Ahead of them was an enormously heavy black woman who seemed in some indefinable way to be frail and weak in spite of her bulk. Could she be the one Canon Gebler had told her about, the one whose cancer had spread its seeds throughout her body?

When the rail was empty, another contingent moved forward to kneel and receive the Bread and Wine. There was not quite room for Olivia. She was one place too far back. Dracula's mother knelt at the extreme left end of the rail, the small count stood beside her, and on his right the woman who might be Mrs. Baker slowly and shakily sank to her knees.

Brother Tim was moving down the rail, extending the Cup to each worshipper in turn. Each time one drank he rotated the chalice a quarter turn and, with a white linen cloth, wiped that part of its rim someone's lips had just touched. It was the prescribed thing to do, and she'd seen the action thousands of times.

The clown conjuror had offered his cards the same way, to child after child in turn, and forced the joker every time.

When Timaeus reached the communicant on the right of the big woman who might be Mrs. Veronica Baker, Olivia started forward. If she was wrong, she'd look like a fool, but she had no choice. When he had wiped the rim, turned the Cup, and held it out again, Olivia reached over the rail, over the big woman's shoulder, and took it from his hand.

She raised the Cup to her lips. Tim's eyes flared wide, and his face went slack with astonishment. "No!" he cried. Hurdling the altar rail, he snatched the Cup, spilling most of the wine. Everyone stared. He and Olivia looked only at each other.

He put the Cup to his lips and drained it. Then he rotated it and licked the rim clean all the way around. Reverently, he put the Cup upside down on the altar and walked quickly back through the choir and out of sight.

Jared Atwell was nearby in his purple verger's cassock, holding his staff of office and looking aghast at what she'd just done. "Get a security officer and follow Brother Tim right away," she said. "I think he'll be somewhere in the undercroft. By the time you find him, he'll be dying or dead. Your job is to make sure there's no commotion about it.

"We've got to find a way to make everybody think his death was from a natural cause. He was a recovering alcoholic and addict, so we should be able to use heart failure or liver disease. I know a doctor who will help once he understands."

When he protested, she cut him off. "Jared, there isn't time to talk now. This is your one chance to bring the whole tragic thing with the old people to a discreet end and make up for the stupid way you've acted, so don't blow it. Do what I tell you quickly and without attracting any attention, and I'll explain it all to you later."

When he was gone, she slipped down a side aisle into a back row, thinking Edward was wrong after all. They were murders. Poor, foolish Brother Timaeus had believed no one should die with his sins unforgiven. To his disordered mind the moment after communion must have seemed the only time that would be a certainty.

How surprised Edward will be when I tell him, she thought. I wonder what he'll say.

Oh, for heaven's sake. Listen to yourself. Didn't you decide you had to stop that nonsense?

Kneeling, she began to pray for the soul of Timothy Conklin. There was no way of knowing, but perhaps he too had died in a state of grace.

~~~~~FIC~TION~~~~~

# Simon McCaffery

# Simon McCaffery



*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* 10/99

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**H**e was supposed to be unraveling the mystery of the missing matter in New York University's exotic-particle rig, but every time Gordon Hollis closed his eyes, he saw his beloved car radio. It was a Blaupunkt with a black glossy face and cat's-eye green LCD readouts, embedded in the dashboard of his boxy used Volvo like a high-tech jewel. Everyone had their vices, their minor obsessions. Gordon's was top-of-the-line audio components.

The Andre and Bella Meyer Physics Building, flanked by the robotics and ultracomputer labs, stood at the corner of Washington Place and Broadway, and parking space was unavailable to faculty and students alike. Several garages were located nearby, but Gordon couldn't afford them, even with the ten percent student discount. This meant he was forced to park his car quite a distance off-campus, on West 13th, before tramping seven blocks to Washington Square. In the city, seven blocks might just as well have been seven light-years in terms of the potential for trouble.

Gordon chewed his lower lip and stared at the blue display screen of his terminal. How could one hope to untangle the superluminal vagaries of zero-mass, quantum-tunneling particles and missing absorption matter when you were worried about your car radio's being stolen? At the ripe old age of twenty-four, he thought he might be developing an ulcer. Einstein probably hadn't suffered similar distractions as a young patent clerk. Of course, he hadn't been living in New York City.

Gordon's terminal had been granted access to Carl, the department's Cray T932 supercomputer. Capable of performing a couple of billion floating point computations per second—hence its name in honor of Sagan—Carl hadn't a clue where in the universe the missing matter sample had departed to.

Gordon stood to stretch his legs. If only the lab had windows, he might be able to see his car from nine stories up. There weren't any, of course, so he sat and tried to concentrate. For the moment he'd told no one of the inexplicable events taking place inside the experiment rig—not Dr. Kearns, his honors program doctoral adviser, or Rebecca, his girlfriend.

Simple paranoia kept him from approaching Kearns. Gordon had accidentally stumbled onto something big, something *enormous*, and he wasn't about to risk letting it slip away. Nearly all the great discoveries were made by accident (or near-religious vision), and most pure physicists made their mark, if any, well before the age of thirty-five. What if Kearns—two decades older, comfortably tenured, and sparsely published—announced Gordon's discovery as his own? Inconceivable, but what if he did?

He hadn't told Rebecca yet because their relationship seemed fragile enough as it was, and he still hoped to convince her to move in with him.

Rebecca also attended NYU, slaving for her master's in biochemistry. Like Gordon, she maintained a hectic schedule of classes, labs, and grading papers as a teacher's

assistant. Free time together was limited, and difficult to enjoy while their bodies were exhausted, their emotions brittle, and their minds preoccupied.

Both tried to eliminate school from conversations, but it invariably crept back in. They would discuss an eight dollar movie or obscure Off-Off-Broadway play over beers, and within no time he would be relating some glitch he had overcome in a magneto-optical trap. Or Rebecca would describe how she had cleverly managed to stamp out a mutated bacterium invading one of her control groups. Gordon would listen and nod at what seemed appropriate times, and his thoughts would begin to drift like high summer clouds. He even caught himself musing about his research after sex, a bad sign. He would glance sideways at Rebecca, curled sweetly against him in the narrow bed, and wonder if she was doing the same. Probably dreaming of protein strands and corkscrewing nucleotides.

Gordon couldn't entirely escape such thoughts, just as he could not stop worrying about losing Rebecca, or whether his beloved Blaupunkt might already be making its way across the city inside some thief's ratty duffel bag to be sold to a pawnshop for twenty-five dollars to buy a vial of crack, or two.

Life in the Big City.

At seven thirty Gordon gave up for the day and logged off Carl. His eyes felt grainy from staring too long at the terminal screen.

On the way out of the lab he glanced at a *Scientific American*

wall calendar hanging above his terminal. (The first calendar to hang from the spot had been "The Girls of Spring Break," which Dr. Kearns had indignantly ordered removed.) Gordon had marked a heavy red circle around Friday, April seventeenth. That was the day, nearly two weeks ago, when in his vain-glorious attempt to detect a graviton or two he had zapped a ten ounce matter sample off to Limbo . . . or somewhere in between.

Gordon smiled all the way down the elevator and out into the deepening twilight. April seventeenth. Conceivably the first day of the Post-Einsteinian Epoch. Stuffy Dr. Kearns would no doubt be horrified to discover that *anno Domini* had been relegated to the scrap heap of time divisions in favor of P.E.E.

His vague dreams of Nobels and immortality vanished when he returned to his car. Feeble radiance from a streetlight glittered off tiny motes below the driver's door. Not diamonds scattered in the wake of some hasty jewel heist but square shards of blue safety glass. They covered the pavement.

The bottom of Gordon's stomach dropped out like the bay doors in a bomber. He'd installed a new door lock with a protective steel plate after the first break-in, and a subsequent thief had succeeded only in reaming out the keyhole. This bandit had simply bashed in the window.

With a sick certainty Gordon opened the door, cursing the small shower of pulverized glass that trickled out. The little dome light



winked on, and he immediately saw the empty slot in the dashboard and the dangling strands of clipped wire. His radio was gone.

At the advice of Nick Fuller, another ninth floor physics whiz kid, Gordon began stashing his new radio (a detachable Blaupunkt) in his trunk. Fuller, a native New Yorker with wirerimmed glasses and dirty-blond hair, seemed to take a grim satisfaction in lecturing Gordon on the subject of thieves and car radios. He had recently contributed to a well-received abstract, "Observations of Coherent Transients from Trapped  $^{85}\text{Rb}$  Atoms," and had begun putting on airs.

"First, you're nuts for owning a car," Fuller squinted at him. "Since you do, never leave anything inside where people can see it. Not cassette tapes, loose change, Tic-Tacs or rubber dog doo. Nuth-thing!"

Fuller pronounced this last word in a thick German accent reminiscent of Sergeant Schultz on *Hogan's Heroes*.

"If you have something in the car you want to protect but don't want to carry," Fuller continued, "namely your stereo, always stop and transfer it to the trunk *before you arrive at your destination*. It is crucial, Gordo, that you never let anyone see you put something in your car trunk and walk away."

Gordon liked to think he had adapted to life in the Apple, to the muggers and rampant evil, and he intensely disliked being reminded that his Oklahoma rearing had hardly prepared him to deal with the daily perils of urban larceny. He

also hated it when Fuller called him Gordo.

Still, he'd constructed a ten inch telescope complete with planetary drive in junior high, had earned a near-perfect SAT score and a full-ride scholarship, and picked up his bachelor's and master's with top honors. He currently ranked in the top five of his class, and an early doctoral degree was a foregone conclusion. So he heeded the advice of Fuller and the police, parking in well-lit areas and always locking the doors.

The following week his car radio was stolen from the trunk in broad daylight in front of his crumbling brownstone apartment. This time the thief, seeing the empty slot in the dashboard, busted a window, dislodged the back seat's upright cushion and wriggled into the trunk, like a serpent poaching eggs from a nest.

Gordon was making little progress on the mystery of the missing particle rig matter, but no one had stolen his car radio in two weeks. Better yet, Rebecca's initial resistance to sharing his ant-colony apartment was faltering.

In the grand tradition of science, he named the elusive particles he found himself dealing with after himself. H-particles. (He judiciously discarded the Hollison.)

The exotic-particle rig, a.k.a. the Trap, had originally been set up to record simple experiments with streams of zero-mass entities known as luxons. Luxons came in three flavors—protons, neutrinos, and the hypothetical and much sought-

after graviton. With the hardware on the fabled ninth floor particle lab at his disposal, Gordon had often dreamed he might pluck a handful of gravitons from the air like some Horatio Alger of the nineties, to the astonishment and admiration of all. What he discovered instead was mass-molecule quantum teleportation, and a Nintendo Game Boy probably used more energy. A couple of years before, a team of Austrian physicists had successfully teleported a single photon. Teams in Rome and France quickly verified the experiment. The following year the Berkeley team teleported an entire atom. . . .

"I thought I was losing my mind at first," he told Rebecca over dinner at Cutter's, a ludicrously expensive restaurant on Lexington Avenue filled with polished wood and brass and gaslight. They were celebrating Rebecca's agreement to move in. Gordon had drunk three glasses of some unpronounceable Italian red wine, and his thoughts seemed to fly straight out of his head, as if flung from the glowing innards of a particle accelerator.

"To keep it simple, your basic neutron is a particle that decays, with a fifteen minute half-life, to a proton, an electron, and an antineutrino. The antineutrino produced is always a right-handed particle—its spin axis rotates clockwise as it moves away from an observer."

Gordon gestured for effect, smiling, giddy as hell. Then he leaned forward.

"The antineutrinos I detected were all left-handed."

Rebecca's face registered nothing.

Despite the extravagant meal, which he really couldn't afford after replacing a stereo and two windows in his car, Gordon could see she was losing interest fast. He decided to go for broke and order dessert. He hailed a passing waiter, who stared through him as only a Big Apple waiter can.

All the antineutrinos in the universe are right-handed, he explained to Rebecca. There is no such thing as a left-handed one. Not since the Diaspora—the big bang. Physicists had spent years trying to explain why, to jibe with established relativistic quantum field theory.

Rebecca shook her head slowly. "I don't understand half this stuff. What do left-handed whatsits have to do with things disappearing?"

Their waiter finally appeared, a struggling actor by day from the way he carried himself, and took their orders for chicory coffee and dessert.

After the waiter departed, Gordon recounted how he had gone to retrieve the absorption matter sample in the rig, hoping for a plausible answer, only to find it gone. He'd thought it was a prank—that Fuller or one of those other coneheads had messed with the rig's calibration and then removed the sample. These were the same guys who used condoms for water balloons.

"So I ran some tests and recreated the experiment with the rig secured. After a few tries it happened again."

He didn't mention that this had taken exactly nine-point-four hours, and that by then he had resembled





a crazed Gene Wilder in *Young Frankenstein*.

Dessert was vanilla ice cream with a Mexican hot sauce topping. The sauce tasted like lava, and Gordon scraped it to one side and cooled his tongue with the ice cream. He didn't want to think what it had cost. Rebecca immediately attacked the modest dome of ice cream in her fluted bowl. She looked sensational in her simple black cocktail dress. And she was paying attention now.

"So, um, where did it go?"

This was even harder to explain to her because he didn't have the faintest idea. The left-handed particles had quantum-tunneled a fraction of a second after being detected—they had moved from one location to another without crossing the space in between. Superluminal. But before they did, they had become phase-entangled with the matter sample. Rebecca's eyes were glazing, so he quickly added that whenever two particles interact on the quantum level a part of each becomes inseparably linked, no matter how far apart they wander.

When his left-handed . . . H-particles . . . had disappeared, in point-zero-zero-six-nine-fifths of a second, they had done more than continue to exert an influence on the absorber matter. They had scanned it, destroyed it atom by atom, and taken the data *with* them, to be precisely reconstructed . . .

"Where?" Rebecca frowned like an impatient child. "Okay, but where?"

Gordon grinned, despite the churning in his stomach and the

ghastly check resting face down on the table in front of him. It could have been the Bronx. Or Tau Ceti. Or the event horizon of a black hole one hundred thousand light years away.

They were walking to his car on 77th Street, Gordon still reeling from the check amount plus tip, when a gaunt man in a grimy stocking cap and mismatched clothes swung out from the shadows of a doorway like a target in *Hogan's Alley*. A switchblade clicked into existence in front of Gordon's face. He heard Rebecca gasp.

The skinny troll waved the blade menacingly. "Gimme the radio, man."

*Gimme the radio.* Gordon gripped his car radio closer to his side like a mother protecting a bashful child. He had begun carrying his radio with him instead of hiding it in his trunk after the last robbery. It had quickly become a habit, schlepping the little black box into movies and restaurants and other people's apartments. Nobody in New York seemed to think it odd, though the act always filled Gordon with a stinging anger and shame.

The switchblade wavered closer, an evil, inverted crucifix.

Gordon's fury momentarily eclipsed his better judgment. With a howl he swung the radio at his assailant's shadowy head.

He heard a grunt of surprise, and then the force of the swing spun him around. His feet tangled under him and he landed hard on the damp pavement. Pain bolted up his hip. For a moment he smelled dusky rain and car exhaust and discard-



ed cigarette butts. A woman's voice—Rebecca's voice—screamed for help.

When he looked up, the mugger had vanished into the humid darkness. So had his radio. Rebecca knelt over him, flushed and shaking. "Oh my God, Gordon! You're bleeding."

Dazed, he looked down, just as the pain hit. Blood was seeping through his shirt across his ribs. The mugger had stabbed him.

He purchased a new car stereo, a Toshiba, at a police auction for forty-five dollars. It was the best he could afford. The radio was cheap, he surmised, because it had been stolen from somebody else. It represented a definite step down in acoustic quality—hell, a whistling plunge off a Warner Bros. cartoon canyon—but it beat listening to the Volvo's squeaks and rattles. With the volume cranked up, it still kept the din of the city at bay.

The officer with whom he filed the assault charge, a sympathetic guy with a widow's peak and lead-colored eyes, seemed knowledgeable on the subject. His name was Paul Dexter. In the previous year, Detective Dexter explained, the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services had received sixty-two thousand seven hundred fifty-five reports of stolen car radios in the city and some fifty-four thousand thefts of other items from motor vehicles.

"Now, you gotta figure that accounts for about one-third of all the actual crimes." Dexter shook his head and smiled sadly. "Most peo-

ple don't even report the thefts 'cause of their insurance."

And, Gordon nearly added, because no one in New York was stupid enough to expect the police to recover their stolen radios. He absently rubbed the surgical bandage beneath his shirt. The wound had been shallow, but the tiny row of black, knobby stitches itched like hell.

"So where do all those stolen radios end up?"

Dexter shrugged. "We've wondered about that. Most thieves are drug users, strung out nineteen-year-old kids desperate to pay for their next fix. They steal a car radio and sell it to a radio shop or a salvage yard for as little as ten bucks."

Before Gordon left, Dexter handed him a booklet that advised him to lock his doors, park in well-lit areas, mark his radio with invisible ink, and carry it with him. And something else. A decal to place on his car window. It read: NO RADIO IN CAR OR TRUNK.

Gordon smoothed it onto the lower right corner of the driver's side window of his Volvo. What did he have to lose, except his dignity?

He began spending longer evenings at the particle lab despite Rebecca's protests and long, sulking silences. Only while he tapped away at his computer terminal, conversing with the rig via Carl, could he rid his mind of the helpless rage he felt over the recurring thefts.

He, doctoral candidate Gordon Dwayne Hollis, could stumble on what appeared to be a superluminal transport system that might



lift actual teleportation from the pages of old science fiction pulps into reality, *but he was powerless to prevent crackheads from stealing his car radio.*

Still, how could he account for a particle that didn't exist in the known universe? Gordon's overstimulated mind chucked out the only answer: it must be artificially produced.

This raised as many new questions as hairs on the back of Gordon's neck. Was there an intelligence orbiting some ancient star an eternity away, patiently beaming its hybrid particles across galaxies, waiting for alien civilizations to accidentally construct portals? What if they were an extradimensional race, well-acquainted with all things quantum, actually able to punch through pocket universes via artificial superluminal tunneling? Or had he tapped into an existing quantum transport system used to tunnel from one end of the universe to the other? A sort of faster-than-light FedEx. If the particles weren't just quarking off to the other side of the galaxy in the blink of an eye, where did the door open to, and assuming it opened both ways, who or what might come calling?

During the few fitful hours Gordon slept, his dreams were filled with impossible particles that spelled out cryptic messages on cathode ray tubes and car radios that blinked out of existence in the middle of Sinatra crooning "New York, New York."

Reality reasserted itself several days later when he returned to his

Volvo after nine fuzzy hours in the lab that had seemed to pass in one. Gordon carried an uneaten ham sandwich and his radio. He nearly dropped both when he saw the shattered hole in the back seat window, directly across from the NO RADIO IN CAR OR TRUNK decal. The back seat's upright cushion was leaning forward again, like a queasy wino. The thief had left a scrap of paper on the back seat. The note read: JUST CHECKING.

It was Nick Fuller, with his mock sympathy and apocryphal *National Enquirer* stories, who gave Gordon the idea of building a portable Trap.

"I knew a guy who had his car radio stolen every month for *three years*," Fuller said gleefully, picking at an inflamed red bump—a zit—on one side of his whiskerless chin. "He tried everything, even bought a fake cover to make a thief think no radio had been installed. Then he bought a faceplate to disguise his radio as a cheap factory unit. Nothing worked. Finally he couldn't take it any more."

He paused as Dr. Kearns lumbered by in his pristine lab jacket, a pink-headed dinosaur.

"It turns out he knew a vet from Nam, an expert on booby traps," Fuller continued when Kearns had gone. "So the vet rigs this thing in the guy's car using fine razor-sharp wire. Try to steal the radio and *phhht!* No more fingers."

Gordon rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on."

Fuller grinned. "Hell, that's nothing. I read about this other nut who



wired a *grenade* to his car stereo. Blew his wheels and some punk kid into a million pieces.”

When Gordon returned to his apartment that evening, Rebecca was gone. Not just out with friends or sequestered in a library study carrel but Gone. All her things from the bathroom and bedroom closets had vanished. Her huge misty Ansel Adams print of Yosemite wasn't hanging above the second-hand paisley sofa. A brief note hung on the refrigerator with a magnet shaped like  $E = mc^2$ . He pulled it off with numb fingers and read it.

Rebecca had moved back in with her former roommate. Moving in with Gordon had been the right thing to do at the wrong time. They were both too driven, the note explained, and it was selfish of her to resent the time he devoted to his studies. Perhaps, after he defended his thesis . . .

Gone! As quickly and inexplicably . . . as a boosted car radio! He waited to see who would win the churning battle inside his chest, Anger or Depression. Anger had been getting a brisk workout of late, and Depression went down like a third-rate club fighter. KO'd.

He dropped the note on the tiny dinette table and sat. Soon he was diagramming a portable version of the Trap on the reverse side of Rebecca's Dear John. Despite fatigue, his mind seemed very clear.

When he was done sketching, he headed for the closest Radio Shack. Yes, the clerk told him, they took the Discover Card. Next he drove to the lab, which was, thank goodness,

deserted. He borrowed an ion gun and the other eclectic items he needed.

Then he returned to his apartment, triple-locked his door, and got busy.

The car's battery would provide ample power. The bulk of the unit would sit in the well in front of the passenger seat, hidden beneath an old blanket. The ion gun, protruding like a snout, would be aimed so that the beam crossed directly in front of the radio's faceplate. Grab the radio and clip the wires—including the new one that triggered power—and a narrow cone of photons impregnated with H-particles strikes the target. Then wave goodbye, if you were *very* fast.

It wouldn't be murder, he told himself. He had a good hunch it would be more like, say, a long, extended vacation. There was no way to calculate whether there was a limit to the amount of matter that would transport on this scale, but he intended to find out.

He nearly fell asleep waiting for the first one.

Gordon crouched behind a hedge at one side of his brownstone apartment's stoop, his Volvo parked at the curb twenty feet away. There was a spanking new Pioneer stereo/compact disc player with built-in graphic equalizer mounted inside. Three CD's fresh from their cellophane wrappers lay exposed in the change dish between the bucket seats—Tom Petty, Billy Joel, and a vintage ELO with a picture of a huge jukebox-neon spaceship. He'd left the driver's door conspicuously



unlocked. Windows were still damned expensive to replace.

The faint scuff of footsteps on the sidewalk roused him in the predawn stillness. Crouching forward, Gordon saw a rumpled man with unwashed hair and ferretlike eyes walk slowly past his car, pause, step closer, quickly scan the street in both directions, and jerk open the door in one practiced motion. The man's scruffy head and upper body disappeared into the Volvo's interior with the speed of an Indy 500 pit crewman. A second later he was lying across the seat on his belly, grappling with the stereo. Gordon's heart began triphammering, and a familiar fury began churning in his stomach.

Nothing happened. With a cold twinge of sanity he realized his jury-rigged mini-Trap had failed—had probably been doomed to failure from the start. The whole idea was crazy. In the meantime he had a front-row seat watching yet another thief rip him off. What the hell was wrong with him? What would Rebecca think if she could see him, disheveled and shivering behind the hedge?

Gordon rose on stiff legs and opened his mouth to shout at the thief.

There was a quick bluish flash like a dying lightbulb. At the same instant he heard a noise like a cork pulled free from a champagne bottle, and a faint thump. When the thief didn't emerge from his car, Gordon hurried to the curb.

The Volvo's door was still open. The Pioneer, wires neatly severed, lay on the carpeted floor between the seats; that had been the *thump* he'd heard. Nearby lay a jackknife with a five inch blade. The pop—that had been the air rushing into the space where a body had existed a fraction of a second earlier.

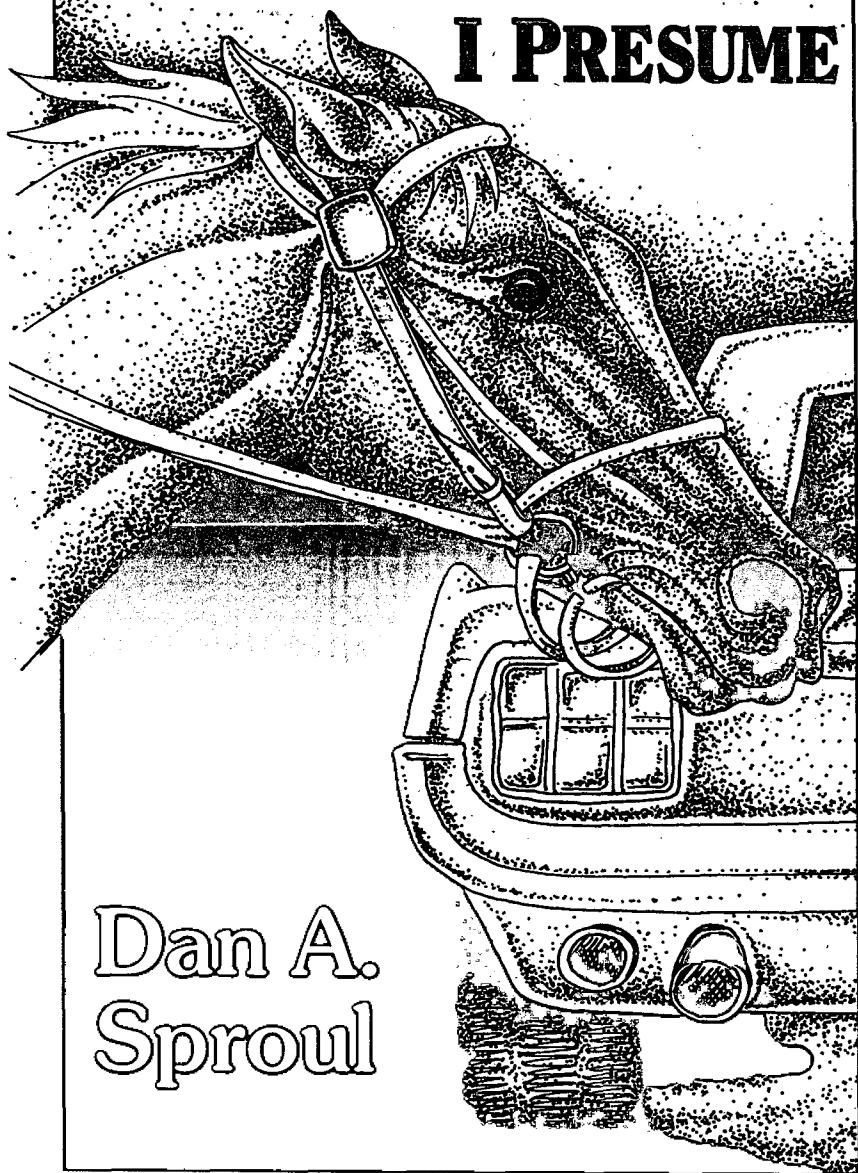
After the dizziness passed, Gordon tossed the pig-sticker into the gutter and giggled. It really should go to the Smithsonian, to be placed on display next to some moon rocks. After all, the first man to reach the stars—

Gordon got in, adjusted the blanket, and started the engine. The miniature rig had automatically shut off after the initial discharge. After a good hot breakfast and a cup or two of strong black coffee, he would disassemble it. Probably.

The first feeble glow of eight-minute-old photons began to filter down on the gray city. Humming cheerfully, he pulled away from the curb.

FICTION

# WINSTON CHURCHILL, I PRESUME



Dan A.  
Sproul

*Illustration by Elaine K. Eckert*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/99*

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**T**he trouble with the private detective business, beyond the wild hours and the low pay, is the versatility required. You have to be able to handle yourself well enough to subdue a bail jumper without getting your nose broke. On the other hand, if you're a one-man outfit like Standard Investigations, you have to be literate enough to type and spell things like "perpetrator" and "assailant." Patience, persistence, and an eye for detail are needed. And of course imagination is required to entertainingly fill those reports that report little but for which you are collecting big bucks. And one more thing, perhaps the most difficult: a successful detective should, with equal ease, be comfortable rubbing shoulders with the super elite and the scum-sucking dregs of our society.

I inserted Jasper Saxon into the latter category as I watched Dollarshort, his nine-to-five, can't-possibly-lose, get-everything-down-you-can, sure winner, as the wretched creature spat out the bit and stumbled gasping to the wire next to last, blowing like a steamboat whistle.

"Damn that Jasper!" I uttered rather indelicately, slamming my copy of the *Form* down on the cement floor. "Why do I listen to him?" It was a rhetorical outburst.

Swine answered anyway. "Because you're a sap."

I should tell you about Swine, whose name is really Swinehart. I use him on a case now and again when the need arises. He does night security work for one of the big firms. He's skinny with big eyeballs,

and he works cheap. His fellow workers call him Captain Goofy, and aptly so. He embraces many annoying habits, not the least of which is a shirtpocket radio with a set of earphones jammed unceasingly in his enormous ears.

"I'm goin' to work," he informed me, adjusting his earphones. "You can be a chump on your own. I ain't bettin' no more of your tips."

"It wasn't me, it was Saxon's horse. He give it to me," I hastened to say as he cranked up the volume and scrambled down the steps.

Saxon's sure-thing got the last of my cash. I had about two dollars in change left to buy something to stuff in my grumbling stomach.

Years ago, before I got into the private detective business, I was an assistant trainer for Buddy Wayne. I'd kept my license up over the years since what little work coming my way in the P.I. business came mostly from people involved in the thoroughbred racing industry in South Florida. In hard times like these, I sometimes signed on as a groom or hotwalker. Pitching horse manure is humbling work—but good for the soul; that's what I tell myself. And the money allows for real food once or twice a week.

Buzzy was on the backstretch gate. A product of the old school, he only bet to show. In the backstretch such people are known as bridge-jumpers. There's a reason for it, but that's another story. I didn't bother pulling my backstretch badge.

"Joe!" he said excitedly. "You get that colt in the last race? Caulfield hisself give 'im to me. Had twenty on him to show. Paid six forty."

His good fortune overcame him; he continued on, chortling in my face. "I knowed he had it at the top of the stretch—he was drawin' off. Paulie never even touched him with the stick."

"May your hemorrhoids explode," I said in reply.

"You drop much?"

"Near two hundred . . . all I had. Anybody looking for help?"

"Old Oslo, or Arnie Ritter maybe."

"You seen Jasper around anywhere?"

"Ain't seen Jasper since yesterday. Supposed to be working on his wife's campaign."

"Campaign?"

"Yeah, she's runnin' for mayor of North Palm Beach."

"Fay? Fay Saxon is running for mayor?"

"Ain't that what I just said?"

"She's an airhead," I protested.

"So what you want from me? I should take off my pants and toss 'em over the fence?"

For several minutes I listened to Buzzy's disjointed philosophical discourse, which catalogued the depravity of all politicians. As I departed slowly, stranding him in mid-tirade, he turned to the fellow behind me coming through the gate and shouted something rude and debasing about the local zoning commission.

Hialeah. Majestic royal palms, reaching a hundred feet into the sky, line the long, winding, almost surreal, main entranceway. Manicured lawns and flowering shrubbery abound along the walkways and lounging areas leading to the vine-covered balconies and marble-

staired clubhouse. An ornate flamingo motif, a central fountain, and picturesque architecture grace the area surrounding the paddock, complementing, without argument, one of the most beautiful tracks anywhere.

But not in the backstretch. The oldest shedrows in the Hialeah backstretch are low, tired, wooden structures, red in color; the service roads are little more than rut-filled paths. It is a rare and hardy blade of grass that survives the hammering hooves and tenacious teeth at a winter meet back there.

I headed down the shedrows toward Jasper's barn. I was a bit curious to hear what kind of excuse he would lay on me to explain Dollarshort's despicable race.

Jasper's string took up about eight stalls in Barn K. He wasn't anywhere around. Gomez, the kid working for him, was washing down Dollarshort with a soapy sponge. Jasper's wife Fay pranced around just out of soap-slop range; she was giving the kid a ragging.

"He must have told you where he was going?"

"What jew wan from me, lady? He no say no thin to me. In *la mañana* he say be back. No come back. I saddle horse for him."

"I'm not going to accept that answer," she told the Spanish kid. "He told me to meet him here an hour ago. Now, he wouldn't just stand me up without leaving a message."

The kid shrugged and picked up a hose. "No message," he said, and shot a stream of water smacking Dollarshort in the flank. The bay, startled, went sideways clumsily,

causing Mrs. Saxon to break off her circuitous assault. She backpedaled several steps before a high heel stuck in the mud, plopping her hind end first into a soap-scummed puddle of moderate depth. She sat in the puddle the better part of ten seconds before she began to bawl.

"This is my best suit," she screeched. Black streaks of mascara began to splotch her remarkable good looks. "Oh my God! I have to give a speech at six o'clock."

Gomez shut the water off.

I came up behind her. "Let me help you up, Mrs. Saxon."

Her head snapped around at the sound of my voice. "Oh, aren't you . . . ah . . . aren't you . . ."

"Joe Standard," I supplied.

"Oh yes, Joe, I was looking for Jasper. Have you seen him? He was supposed to meet me. It isn't like him."

"Like to see him myself. Let me help you up." She extended her arms with the reluctance of one about to be nailed to a cross. I got her under the armpits and lifted her to her feet onto dry ground. Gomez fished her shoe out of the mud and handed it to her.

I made a stab at light conversation. "I hear you're running for mayor?"

"Yes, it's a special election. The city council kicked Hiram Nussbaum out of office." She dropped her shoe on the ground and wiggled her foot back into it. "I just can't understand why Jasper isn't here to meet me. He was supposed to pick up the bumper stickers and . . . look at this suit. What am I going to do? No bumper stickers, my suit is ruined,

I can't even sit on the car seat until I dry. What if somebody sees me? I'm a mess." She looked about frantically.

"I . . . ah . . . I haven't seen Jasper for a couple of days," I said in a passing attempt to reassure her. "He probably got tied up somewhere—lost track of time. If there's anything I can . . ."

"Wait a minute!" she broke in. "Aren't you a private detective or something?"

"Eh . . . yeah."

"Oh, this is splendid. I want to hire you."

"You want to hire me? Ah . . . I don't know . . ."

"What are your rates?"

"Look, ah . . ."

She didn't wait to hear my rates. She rummaged around in her purse and pulled out a soggy wallet. From the wallet she withdrew two fifties and whipped them in my face.

"Here's a hundred dollars. Find Jasper and my bumper stickers and make sure he gets to the Holiday Inn in North Palm before seven thirty. That way I'll have time to get home and change."

"That only gives me three and a half hours," I pointed out.

"I know," she said. "And don't forget the bumper stickers."

I took the money. What the hell, it beat forkin' horse poop. As she started for the parking lot, it crossed my mind: I didn't have the foggiest notion of where to start. "Hey, hold on," I shouted. "Where are you getting the bumper stickers printed?"

"I don't know," she shouted back. "That was Jasper's job."

There are a minimum of a hun-

dred and fifty printers in the Miami area that can print bumper stickers. That's just a guess. But I bet it's close. I know Jasper from way back. He was a hardboot. He kept an apartment in Miramar to be near his string, returning to his house in North Palm Beach only when he didn't have something heavy going on at the track. That meant he only got home on an occasional weekend or when the track was dark. Screwing around with Fay's bumper stickers had to be a major pain for him. Chances were, he wouldn't go far out of his way to get the job done. My guess was, he found a printer near his apartment, near the track, or somewhere in a straight line between the two.

My one room office, with the cot under the big blowup photograph of Seattle Slew demolishing the collection of crows he opposed in the Preakness, was downtown in the back of the Sunbelt Realty Company. No point in going there. The phone had been disconnected two weeks ago. Besides, there wasn't time. I wheeled my '65 Mustang convertible out of the east end parking lot onto Fourth Avenue and headed south two blocks to a pay phone.

I spent fifteen minutes calling printers on the several possible routes Jasper would take. I was down to my last quarter. I wasn't getting anywhere, but I was making good time. It occurred to me that Fay was pretty dippy but surely she must have tried to call Jasper's apartment in Miramar.

It was an unlisted number. I had to go into the glove compartment of the Mustang for my address book.

In my absence a lowlife snagged the pay phone. Shoulder-length tangled stringy hair, a ring in his ear, enormous baggy shorts to below the knees, the teenager lacked only a bone through his nose and the word "idiot" tattooed on his forehead to complete the image of perfect blockhead.

I waited three or four minutes, then banged on the phone booth. It was coming on to five thirty, leaving me only a couple of hours. It would take one of those hours to drive to North Palm Beach. After ten minutes I hammered on the booth again. The kid gave me the finger. I slid the door open, grabbed him by the neck, and pitched him onto the tarmac. He was quickly up and took off running, the receiver still in his hand with the cord dangling down.

I took a run up Fourth Avenue North and placed the call from a mini-mall near 103rd Street. No answer. I crossed over to Red Road and headed for the Palmetto Expressway.

Jasper's apartment was just a few blocks from Calder Race Course, where he raced and trained most of his stock through the summer months. I wheeled the Mustang off the expressway at Twenty-seventh Avenue.

It was a small apartment building, only two stories, four apartments on each level. There was an outside chance he might be with his horses stabled at Calder, but I decided to check the apartment first. The parking lot held about twelve spaces. The half-ton white

Ford pickup in the lot looked a lot like Jasper's.

According to the maildrop inside the hall, Jasper was in Apartment 3 on the ground floor. I pushed the bell and heard it ring inside. After a minute I banged on the door.

"Hey, Jasper, open up. It's Joe Standard."

No response.

When I tried the doorknob, it turned. I pushed the door open. Jasper was home, crumpled up against the bookcase. He lay on his side, an open eye turned down to stare at his nose, flat against the hardwood floor. I closed the door behind me quickly.

I felt for a pulse, but Jasper was already close to room temperature. There didn't appear to be any blood on the white shortsleeved shirt he wore. I pulled him all the way over on his face for a look-see at his back. I'd just about decided on a heart attack when I noticed a spot of dried blood on his neck. I could rule out the heart attack, and I could rule out suicide. The back of his skull was cracked open.

There didn't seem to be any furniture scattered about the room, indicating a fight. I lifted a pen from the desk, gripping it between my knuckles, and brushed Jasper's thinning hair aside. Whatever bonked him in the head had a corner on it. I wiped the pen on Jasper's pants leg and dropped it back on the desk.

The box of bumper stickers was on a chair near the door. The top of the box was open. An invoice for two thousand stickers lay on a nearby table. Jasper had signed for them.

And I should have guessed—the printer was Deadhorse Defarge. I pulled one of the stickers out with my fingernails for a better look. SAXON FOR MAYOR—not terribly original. I laid it gently on the open box and took another long look at Jasper.

When you pass a certain age, when your friends and acquaintances begin to die, the inevitability of death, particularly your own, becomes a chronic concern. The tradeoff is, you gain a special empathy for your fellow man and his condition, a virtue rarely bestowed on the young and healthy. It's that time in life when one's values begin to reshape, opinions firm up, a time when one might discover that each of us is flawed, that judging a person good or bad is a problem in percentages calculated by our own biased mathematics.

Jasper was a friend I admired and respected although he was not what someone outside the horseracing world would consider ethical. Not many in the horse running business were these days. Concealing a horse's true form was standard stuff, particularly with claiming horses. Stiffing the clockers, entering horses into competition they couldn't handle, and entering at unsuitable distances in efforts to bamboozle fellow trainers and the betting public—it was expected. Everybody did it, everybody who wanted to survive in the business.

Maybe he wasn't ethical, maybe he wasn't particularly lovable, or laughable, but he was still a friend. And I could grieve; I had reached the age of reason.

The question now was, what was I going to do about it? Contrary to popular myth, my work as a private detective was restricted to the categories of security, divorce actions, missing property, and an occasional bail jumper. Murder was a bit out of my league. Besides, I didn't have any chums on the police force to feed me information or check out license plate numbers. My relationship with the police department was the love-hate type. They loved to hate me.

I wasn't even too keen on reporting the death and giving them my name. Convention won out. I went into the bathroom and grabbed a facecloth hanging on the towel rack, then picked up the phone with the cloth and dialed 911.

"Please hold."

While I was holding, my eyes fell on a small cast-bronze figure lying on its side under the desk. I bent down for a closer look at the nameplate. It was a statuette of Native Dancer in a selling pose, legs slightly askew, exhibiting his excellent conformation. Blood and a few strands of hair stained the bottom of it.

"Thank you for holding. What's your emergency?"

"I found a dead guy. Somebody bashed in his head."

"Your location, please?"

I gave her the address.

"And your name?"

"Winston Churchill," I responded, dropping the phone back into the cradle. I used the facecloth to open and close the door when I left.

I tossed the cloth into the glove compartment and headed back

south to Miami Springs. I got down to Pro Players Stadium before I remembered that I'd forgotten the bumper stickers. I figured my client wouldn't care under the circumstances.

When Fay had been talking to Gomez at the track, she'd mentioned that Jasper had told her to meet him at the track in an hour. So Jasper must have been alive less than two hours ago. That meant that when he delivered the bumper stickers, Deadhorse Defarge might have been one of the last to see Jasper alive.

Me and Deadhorse had done business before. Deadhorse was Morris Defarge, sole proprietor of *Morris's Money Horses*, a dollar tipsheet. Deadhorse was a short, fat little man. He wore inch-thick glasses that looked like Coke bottle bottoms and smoked evil-smelling cigars. He hadn't picked a winner on his sheet that paid more than ten bucks since 1983, and he probably had the first nickel he'd ever bilked from an unsuspecting horseplayer. Deadhorse cranked out his tipsheet on a printing press in a garage near downtown Miami Springs.

His van was parked in the driveway. I parked the Mustang in front of the Paramount Land & Title Company next to Deadhorse's garage. From the direction of a corner restaurant Benny Stein came walking up the sidewalk toward me carrying two Styrofoam cups. Benny was an ex-jockey, ex-exercise rider, and full-time boozier. His jockey license had been lifted in 1968 for holding horses. Benny worked for Deadhorse hawking the sheet at



the track. He veered toward the Mustang to meet me.

Benny had a screechy, irritating voice, no doubt worn out from the strain of barking the sheet. He greeted me with, "Standard . . . what's up, Morris gettin' divorced again?"

The door to the garage was open. Deadhorse was squinting at us from behind the printing press. "That you, Benny?" he shouted. "Get your butt in here with that coffee."

The crack of a rifle rang out. The slug ricocheted off the press and whined away into the wall. Deadhorse did a brodie under the press. I turned to see where the shot had come from. The next one buzzed past my head and tore a chunk of brick off the land and title company building, throwing a piece in my face.

I hit the ground. Benny and two cups of hot coffee landed on top of me. We both tried to roll under the Mustang. Benny won. I couldn't have fit underneath anyway. The third slug threw sparks off the Mustang's front fender and thunked into a tangle of bushes next to the building.

"Shoot back! Shoot back!" Benny screeched at me from under the car.

"I don't carry a gun," I said, wrapped around the front tire.

"Here," said Benny. He slid a .45 automatic at me. "Watch out, it's got a hair trigger," he warned.

"You got a hair brain," I shouted back.

Several minutes of silence passed.

"I think he's gone," Benny said. "Why don't you take a peek?"

Close by, a siren cut loose. Peer-

ing around the front tire, I watched a police cruiser slide to a stop across the street. I unwrapped myself from the tire and did a quick survey of the rooftops across the street with my nose lying on the Mustang's fender. Everything looked clear.

Two uniforms and a cop in a brown suit the color and consistency of cardboard dried with a waffle iron piled out onto the street, guns drawn.

"It's okay," I yelled to Benny. "It's the cops."

"Christ!" Benny shouted, and made a grab for his automatic. There was a tremendous bang. It was Benny's automatic blowing a .45 caliber hole in my front tire. All the cops hit the pavement. The cop in the rumpled brown suit shot out the plate glass window in the Paramount Land & Title Company. I dived into the shrubs.

The brown suit squatted and gripped his .38 with both hands. "Throw out your weapons and come out with your hands up!"

I held my hands up above the shrubbery. "I ain't got no gun, you dumb ass!" I shouted back. "It's that nitwit under the car. Throw the gun out, Benny."

Benny came up slowly, hands in the air, two fingers gingerly grasping the automatic by the handle.

"Toss that gun out here," one of the uniformed cops ordered.

Benny pitched the gun. It exploded on impact, sending a slug through the passenger door of the police car, on through the windshield, thence to explode the neon sign of the Mayfair Hotel across the street, ricochet off the building and off the fire

escape, and take out the front window of a furniture store fifty yards down the block. All three cops knee-jerked a round into the side of the land and title company, taking out a three thousand dollar copy machine and the bottle on the water cooler. The third bullet reduced a hundred-and-ten-year-old Seth Thomas pendulum wall clock into one-hundred-and-ten-year-old clock junk.

When the smoke cleared, I came back up slowly out of the bushes with my hands over my head. The cops got back to their feet and wasted little time cuffing Benny. It took thirty minutes to explain everything to the police. They cut me loose and took Benny in for discharging a firearm in the city limits. I thought about telling these cops about Jasper but could see no profit in handing them a patsy.

I still needed to question Deadhorse. We found him unconscious under the printing press. He had conked his head on the press dodging the bullet.

He came around after a few minutes, claimed he was okay. In his statement to the police he insisted he knew of nobody who wanted to shoot him. I, however, could imagine there must be hundreds of his long-suffering customers who would be delighted to undertake that task.

Deadhorse lay stretched out on an old ratty couch against the back wall of the garage. He had a knob on his forehead the size of a turtle egg.

"What the hell you want, Standard? My head is killing me." He closed his eyes and groaned. I

thought for a minute he'd passed out again.

"When you delivered the bumper stickers to Jasper Saxon, was there anybody with him?"

I was thinking that the killer might have been with Jasper when Deadhorse delivered the stickers. And Deadhorse could identify him. If so, that could be the nut with the rifle. He did shoot at Deadhorse first. Or I could be all wet and it was an irate customer.

Deadhorse groaned. "I think I need a doctor."

"Be glad to take you over to the Hialeah Hospital emergency room. We have to use your van, though. Benny shot out one of my tires." This, I decided, would also work to get Deadhorse out of harm's way in case the rifleman returned.

Deadhorse fished the van keys from his pocket and handed them to me. "Yeah, there was a guy with Jasper," he said. "You know, the agent? What's his name?"

I shook my head.

"Insurance agent? Travel agent? Secret agent?"

"Limey . . ." Deadhorse uttered; then his eyes rolled up in his head until only white appeared.

I shook him. "Deadhorse . . . Morris. Wake up!"

It took a few minutes. He finally came back around. The first thing he said was, "How did you get past security? Are you here for Margaret's piano lessons? You don't look much like a piano teacher."

"I'm not a piano teacher," I replied.

"Didn't think so," Deadhorse said. "You must be a reporter. What's

happened now? Is that s.o.b Mac-Arthur shootin' his mouth off again? He thinks he's God. But I'm the president. The buck stops here."

"Look, Deadhorse . . ."

"Where's a dead horse?"

"You're Deadhorse."

"Are you insane, man? Do I look like a horse? I'm the president of the United States."

"The president?"

"Mr. President to you—or you can address me as Mr. Truman."

"You think you're Harry Truman?"

Deadhorse sat up on the couch. "Don't get smart with me, boy. I can have you shot for breaking into this secured area."

I figured the best thing was to humor him. "Look, Mr. President, I'm a special agent sent here to escort you to Bethesda for your annual checkup. The van's waiting outside."

"Very good, son. I'm ready," the president replied. "Would you like a word of advice before we leave?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. President."

Deadhorse smiled and nodded his approval. "Okay then, always remember this: never kick a fresh turd on a warm day."

"Right."

It occurred to me as we crossed over the canal back into Hialeah that I probably should call Fay Saxon and tell her about Jasper. It was doubtful the police had been able to contact her. The way Deadhorse was acting, there was a good chance he had a concussion for starters. I decided to get him to the emergency ward first and call from the hospital.

It took some doing to get Dead-

horse admitted. Although he probably should have been committed. He finally accused the nurse of being a Communist, whereupon he promptly passed out cold on the waiting room floor. This expedited matters.

When they hauled him off, I made myself scarce. There was no telling how long Deadhorse would be a high government official. All I knew now was that the guy with Jasper was some kind of agent. And limey, what did that mean? Or did Deadhorse say blimey—maybe he was Margaret Thatcher before he was Harry Truman.

I waited five minutes while they paged Fay Saxon. Finally she picked up the phone.

"Jasper? Where have you been? I want you to pass out the bumper stickers at the door when everybody leaves. Where are you now?"

"Fay, it's Joe Standard. I'm calling about Jasper."

"Did you find him?"

"Yes, more or less but . . ."

"Is he on his way?"

"Not exactly. I, ah, I found him in his apartment. He was . . ."

"Don't tell me he forgot to pick up the bumper stickers. I don't understand why he can't concentrate on anything but those damn horses. Doesn't he realize that what I'm doing is more important?"

"Fay, he didn't forget the bumper stickers. He couldn't bring them to you. He's dead."

"Oh my God, oh my God! What am I going to do?"

I wasn't sure whether she meant oh my God, what am I going to do without Jasper, or oh my God, what

am I going to do without the bumper stickers.

She began to moan. "It's my fault," she wailed into the phone. "The doctor told him to cut down on his cholesterol intake. I should have been preparing his meals, watching his diet for him—oh my God."

I guess Jasper meant more to her than she realized.

"It wasn't your fault, Fay," I said consolingly.

"Yes . . . yes, it was. I know now—now that it's too late. I should have been taking care of him instead of fooling around with this election."

"Fay, he didn't die from a heart attack."

"He didn't?"

I felt obliged to tell her the facts. After all, she was a paying client. Unfortunately, she would surely tell the cops that she got the cheery news from me. They would in turn deduce that it most likely wasn't Winston Churchill reporting the death. I pondered the charges they would nail me with. How about obstruction of justice through the felonious use of an alias to report a murder coupled with the old standby, perpetration of flight from the scene of a crime. And let's not forget the most heinous of all, impersonation of a revered historical figure. Don't you just love cop talk?

I guessed it was time to add up what I did know. Dollarshort should have won. He should have at least got in the money. He was nine to five for a reason. The field he faced was really no match for him. When I saw him with Gomez after the race, he didn't appear to be lame or to have bled. So what happened?

The form of a good racehorse almost never changes that radically from race to race without a good reason. Dollarshort never made a run at the leaders—it just didn't figure.

I definitely needed to find out what kind of agent Deadhorse saw in Jasper's office. The only limey agent I could think of was Double-oh-seven.

It was doubtful Deadhorse would be acquainted with an insurance agent or travel agent. For him, there was no world outside the racetrack. And Jasper didn't have anything in his string valuable enough for equine insurance. Plus, he never traveled out of Florida with his horses.

It was getting late. I decided it wouldn't be wise to return to my office. The police would surely talk to Fay soon and would be looking for Winston Churchill in earnest. Swine was working night security at a used car lot downtown. Reluctantly he forked over his apartment key when I explained my circumstances.

I parked Deadhorse's van outside and ventured in. Swine was a radio person: no TV. One single bed, a recliner chair, a badly chipped deep porcelain sink, a refrigerator without a handle, and a table with a scorched hotplate lined one wall. A small dent in the wall containing a toilet and shower behind a curtain along with about nine thousand *Racing Forms* occupied the opposite wall. The *Forms* were stacked neatly in chronological order. There was a naked hundred watt bulb in the center of the ceiling to read by.

I grabbed the last *Form* in the last stack. It was for today's race. I plopped down in the recliner and opened to the sixth, Dollarshort's race. Maybe there was something there.

He looked strong. The race was a sprint—six furlongs. Dollarshort had overpowering fractions in his last couple of races. He should have been out in front by six lengths at the half mile pole against the bunch he was in with. Yet he broke sluggishly and made no run at all . . . almost like he was running in a slow motion highlight. Then I saw a small detail I'd had no reason to take note of before. In the *Racing Form* Juan Paulie was named to ride Dollarshort. But in the program Angel Rodriguez, his regular rider, was named and did in fact ride him. I knew because I remember swearing at him in the stretch. Did it mean anything? I checked out the eventual winner of the race—Avalon Town. Paulie was also named to ride him. Paulie had been named to ride both horses.

Paulie was a hot new apprentice jockey. He was hitting the board with nearly everything he rode. It was not uncommon for a hot jockey to be named on more than one mount. And there was little doubt that Avalon Town at five to two would probably win it if Dollarshort didn't fire. Paulie was getting hot horses because he did perform well and his agent was an excellent handicapper. *His agent*—Jeeezus, a jockey agent. Where the hell was my head? Paulie's agent, what's-his-name, the limey . . . Caulfield.

I spent the next two hours going

back through old *Forms*. Swine was a devoted player; he religiously marked the first four finishers of every race. Before he returned at midnight, I'd found something very suspicious that could've had something to do with what happened in Jasper's apartment.

Swine snores. Another aid to a sleepless night in the recliner was wrestling through the wee hours in speculation over what had happened in Jasper's apartment. Obviously the murder wasn't premeditated or the murderer would have brought along something more utilitarian than a statue of a horse to do Jasper in. . . .

"I don't get it," said Swine.

I went through it with him once more. "Five instances in the last month where Paulie is named on the second or third contender—the bet-down favorite turns in a dismal performance, has a complete form reversal. Don't you find that peculiar?"

"Maybe," Swine admitted. "How did they do in their next start?"

"Only two started back. Both won with a slight class drop. Which indicates there probably wasn't any lasting problem."

"Could be a coincidence," Swine contributed. "Or you probably had a bet on them when they went in the crapper."

We had to wait for Swine's giggling to subside before we loaded into Deadhorse's van and headed for the track. There wasn't any point in trying to explain anything to Swine. The vile thumping, crashing, screeching racket he called music, which he continuously piped to

his brain through his insidious little radio, had rendered him virtually brain dead.

If it had happened once, or even twice, maybe I'd believe it a coincidence—but not five times. And each and every time Paulie was the beneficiary.

Jasper was what is known in the racing industry as a public trainer. He owned a few of the horses he trained, kept in his wife's name. He owned a couple more in partnership with others. But he trained a large stable, more than forty head. Most of the stable were owned by absentee owners, racing stables, or breeding farms. The bulk of his charges were stabled at the Calder training facility under the care of his assistant trainer Alan Mathews, a fellow I needed to talk to. But we headed to Hialeah first.

The horses Jasper kept at Hialeah were those entered to race at Hialeah. They were under the care of the groom, Gomez. The fact that Gomez spoke nearly no English was not a handicap. No one spoke English at Hialeah. "Dolloorshoort, *es bien*," said Gomez. He patted the big gelding on the neck. "He win beeg next time."

I asked Gomez if he knew Caulfield, if he had seen him or Paulie around before Dollarshort's race. It took a long time to get my inquiry across to him—he called in one of the other grooms to help translate. When Gomez understood the question, he began to wave his arms. His voice was agitated. The groom translated.

"Gomez say Señor Caulfield he come see Señor Saxon, but *jefe* no

here. Gomez say he no looking El Señor. He go put feed buckets." The groom waited to hear the rest of Gomez's agitated tirade, then began again. "Gomez say he see Señor Caulfield give sugars to Dollarshort. Gomez say he run to El Señor . . . *como se dice?* How you say—talk loud to Señor Caulfield—say to get out—no to feed horses. Only Gomez to feed horses. Gomez say he make Señor Caulfield to go way from horses."

"Ask Gomez if he told Jasper . . . Señor Saxon."

Gomez answered himself. "I tell him *muy pronto*." He continued on in Spanish. All eyes turned to the groom.

"Gomez say *policia* in brown suit here looking for you."

With Swine in tow, I wheeled the Mustang into the horseman's parking lot at Calder. I told Swine to see if he could find out where Caulfield might be found and meet me at the car in half an hour.

An assistant trainer for a stable as big as Jasper's is a pretty busy guy at eight thirty in the A.M. It took awhile to run him down. The first thing out of his mouth was, "Standard, you know there was a cop in a rumpled brown suit here just ten minutes ago looking for you?"

"No doubt he wants my advice on a case," I responded.

"Said he wanted you for questioning. It was about Jasper."

Mathews was one of those rare exceptions in the trainer world, an all business, no nonsense, never-bet-on-a-horse-in-his-life type, really hard to deal with. But it took on-



ly a few minutes to convince him that I had nothing to do with Jasper's death. I told him the truth: that I discovered the body, called it in, and then split. What I wanted to know from him was why Paulie didn't get the ride on Dollarshort.

Mathews explained that Rodriguez, the regular jock, was a bit put out at losing the ride on Dollarshort.

"The gelding was one of the few live horses he was riding regularly," he said.

Mathews added, "He put the case to Jasper that the three times he was up on Dollarshort he won twice and placed. Jasper decided to ride him back. We had no way of knowing if Paulie would fit the horse. All we could really count on with Paulie was the bug allowance—seven pounds. Jasper decided to go with the journeyman, Rodriguez, even though Paulie was setting the world on fire."

"Did Gomez tell you about catching Caulfield—"

"You mean feeding the sugar? Yeah, I heard about it. Jasper was really upset. First place, he didn't like anybody fooling with his horses. Second place, Caulfield didn't have any business there."

"Maybe he was there to talk to Jasper—see if he would change his mind and put Paulie back up on the horse. That's a possibility, isn't it?"

Mathews shook his head. "Not likely. It was already past the deadline. The programs were already printed. Hell, the race was going off in a few hours."

"What do you think he was doing there?"

Mathews shrugged. "I don't have a clue."

"When the detective was here, did you tell him about Caulfield?" I asked.

Mathews looked at me strangely. "Why would I . . . he didn't ask me about that. He was interested in you saying you were Winston Churchill. And he wanted to know what motive you had for killing Jasper."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him you were a sore loser."

Several years back Mathews, at my request, touted me a horse that ran like a three-legged giraffe with arthritis. Days afterwards I just happened to mention to Swine in jest that Mathews was probably a cross-dresser. Somehow the rumor spread out of control through the backstretch. But that's another story.

It was pretty clear that the detective I saw outside Deadhorse's place was the same detective who was now looking for me. Even Miami couldn't produce two cops with crap-colored suits that looked like they had been digesting overnight in an alligator's stomach. And it was virtually certain as to which end of the stick I would be grasping if he found me. I needed to confront Caulfield with what I suspected before that happened.

I found Swine back at the Mustang, radio earphones in place, bopping about and snapping his fingers to assorted tortuous grunts and squeals accompanied by a clamorous din, which in his ignorance he was pleased to call music. I really needed to search out a better class of accomplice.

"Did you find him?"

Swine stopped in mid-gyraton, then achieved a sorry-looking moon walk before offering up a reply. "He's hustling mounts over in the track kitchen."

"That's no good. I have to get him alone someplace."

Swine showed me his palms. "Sorry, maybe I should give you my shoes."

"I've got an idea." I said, ignoring his stupid rejoinder. Swine condescendingly removed one earphone for a listen. "You go in the kitchen and tell him Arnie Ritter wants to see him right away. Tell him Arnie sent you over to find him because he wants to put Paulie up on Silver Slew. That should get him over there in a hurry."

Silver Slew, a three-year-old son of the mighty Seattle Slew, was a graded stakes winner and top Kentucky Derby candidate. I didn't think Caulfield could pass that up.

I caught Swine as he turned to leave. "Wait a minute. I never met Caulfield. What does he look like?"

"Skinny little dude, bony face, big bony nose, high cheekbones, buck teeth. Think of a moose munching on corn through a chain-link fence. Come to think of it, he looks a lot like Frenchy Morin's sister except he don't have no mustache." Swine departed, chuckling to himself.

On the way over to Arnie's barn I tried to sort out what I was going to say to Caulfield. Fay Saxon said she'd talked to Jasper an hour before I met with her at Jasper's Hialeah barn. That was not long after the sixth race—about four thirty. He didn't have the bumper stickers then—she would surely have asked.

That meant Jasper was alive without bumper stickers at three thirty. When I found him, it was about five forty-five. Best I could tell, he had been dead at least an hour, probably longer, and he had bumper stickers. That left a window of an hour and fifteen minutes.

After three thirty but before four forty-five the stickers were delivered and Jasper was killed. Deadhorse put the limey there. Normally Jasper wouldn't be in his apartment at that hour—not with Dollarshort running in the sixth. He had to be there waiting for Deadhorse to deliver the stickers. The question was, what was Caulfield doing there?

Swine was right. Caulfield did look like Frenchy Morin's sister. "I say," he said. "'Ave you seen Arnie Ritter about?"

"Let's see if I got this straight," I said to him, dodging the chitchat. "After Gomez caught you feeding sugar cubes to his horse, you decided Jasper was smart enough to figure out your scam. So you went to see him. Did you expect to bribe him or what?"

"Who the 'ell are you?"

"The name's Joe Standard. I know you killed Jasper. I'm just trying to figure how it came down."

"You're a bloody lunatic is what you are."

Caulfield made the observation and turned to leave.

I got a fistful of his collar and pulled him back. His skinny little arms windmilled around like someone falling backward off a tightrope.

"Hold on there, shorty. Don't you want to hear how I figured it out? You've got to have the best scam I

ever came across. Because Paulie is the hottest apprentice riding, you get to pick and choose the top mounts. But you don't get the very best every race, so when Paulie has to take a second or a third contender, wouldn't it be sweet to feed the top horse some tranquilizers or a narcotic of some kind in lumps of sugar not long before the race?

"That would accomplish many useful things. It would take the most serious competition out of Paulie's way, allowing you to bet his horse with confidence. You get ten percent of Paulie's purse, you get the win bet on Paulie's horse, you move Paulie another notch up on the jockey standings, and then there's still the cream—you get to bet the drugged favorite when he runs back at a price, knowing there was really no serious problem when he failed to perform last time out. Well, is that about it?"

"Ain't you ever 'eard? They drug test these bleedin' horses," Caulfield pointed out.

I noticed that when he talked fast his English was so excellent I could scarcely understand him.

"Nobody dopes a horse to lose," I clarified, "no profit in it. Unless it's somebody else's horse. Even you ought to be smart enough to know that. And smart enough to know that normally only the first two or three finishers are ever tested. Even at that, the labs barely get to most of them unless something is suspect."

"Let me go! You're crazy as a bed-bug."

I had him. He knew I was onto his swindle. I could see it in his beady

eyes and the sweat dripping off the end of his conspicuous beazer.

"I know you didn't go there planning to kill him," I said. "But I have a witness who puts you in the room about the time he died. And the only reason you'd be there was that you knew Jasper could put two and two together—Gomez catches you with the sugar, then Dollarshort runs like he's chained to the starting gate. You might as well come clean. Hell, it might have been self-defense." I said this to loosen him up. Naturally, it was only self-defense if Jasper was attempting to attack the little Englishman with the back of his head.

"I didn't want to kill him," Caulfield sputtered quietly. "He wouldn't take money. He told me to get out—said 'e was going to call the stewards. You know what that would mean. I wouldn't be able to get a license on any track in the country. I couldn't even get through the front gate. I only wanted to knock him out—to give me time to think."

"So when you realized Deadhorse could identify you, you went there with a sniper rifle and tried to take him out."

Caulfield gave me a puzzled look. "What the 'ell you talkin' about? A deadhorse, you say?"

"Morris Defarge—Deadhorse. You tried to kill him."

Caulfield shook his head vigorously. "No. I don't own a gun. I don't know anything about a gun or any dead horses."

You only had to look at him to know he was telling the truth. The limey really didn't strike me as the type to be crawling across rooftops

with a rifle. It was more the style of a deranged customer screwed out of his bankroll by Deadhorse's lousy sheet for the umpteenth time. Hell of a coincidence all the same.

I still had a hold on Caulfield's shirt. "Come on," I ordered, guiding him ahead of me down the shedrow toward the backstretch entrance. We went about thirty feet before meeting up with Swine in step with

the rumpled brown suit. I pulled up short and let them come to me.

Brown-suit fished out his badge and introduced himself: "Clifton Donnelly, Miami Metro." He put the badge away, then looked me up and down slowly. He smiled that malicious cop smile. I gripped the back of Caulfield's collar just a bit stronger.

"Winston Churchill, I presume?"

### SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Greg Napoli was the hit man identified in the lineup. He was the one wearing the gold tie, brown sweater, and tan oxfords.

|       | NAME             | FOOTWEAR        | COAT/SWEATER       | TIE       |
|-------|------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------|
| LEFT  |                  |                 |                    |           |
| 1     | Carlos Jablonski | alligator boots | herringbone jacket | green     |
| 2     | Frankie Hanewicz | brown boots     | black sweater      | red       |
| 3     | Augie Leonello   | black shoes     | tweed coat         | brown     |
| 4     | Greg Napoli      | tan oxfords     | brown sweater      | gold      |
| 5     | Bart Ivanoff     | black boots     | striped sweater    | black     |
| 6     | Eddie Kosta      | buckskin shoes  | navy jacket        | striped   |
| 7     | Danny Mankato    | brown shoes     | tan sport jacket   | polka dot |
| RIGHT |                  |                 |                    |           |

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Hulton Getty/Tony Stone Images*

Conductors conducting. Or not. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

# LIGHTNING AND JUSTICE

Dave Waskin

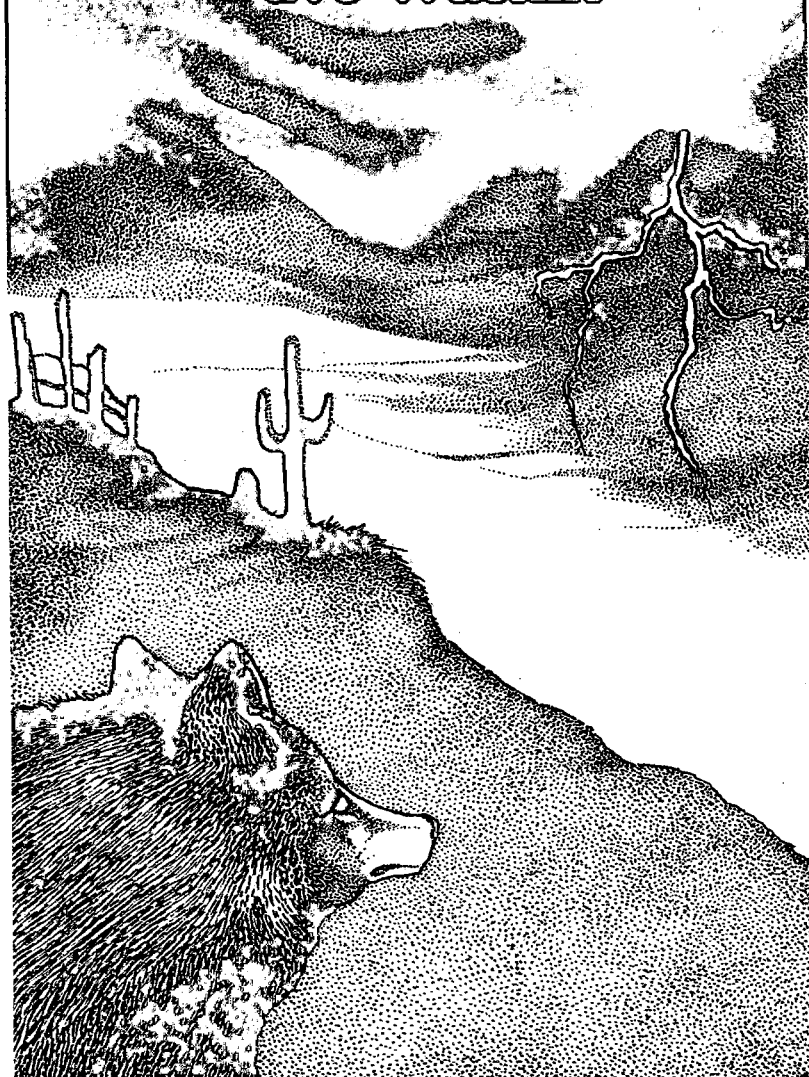


Illustration by James Moir

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/99

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**O**ld Man Carl loved to drive. He loved it most at twilight or late afternoon when the sky was taking on wild colors and his pickup was entering the valley between the Mexican border and the town of Cordes, Arizona. It was in the valley that Carl's mind took on phantom qualities, like wind flying through a canyon: so lonesome, so free. He could picture vanished rivers and imagine himself connected to the sky and stars. He could stop his truck by the side of the road, scoop a handful of dirt, and feel the earth turning. He could do this often, and he did it now.

But he didn't linger. Thunderheads were building to the east, and daylight was diminishing. He had binoculars, a camera, and a telephoto lens to manage as he hiked from the road up the hill where he had positioned himself before, past the mesquite, cactus, and juniper. He climbed to a point where there were fewer rocks and he could lower himself, stomach to the ground with elbows propped. From there he could see more of the valley and watch the place where he had seen the two men working several days before. If he were lucky, they would soon appear, and he would catch them on film again. Then there would be no doubt about what they were doing—no disbelievers who could say it was the wild imagination of an old man and nothing more.

It had been an accident, the way he'd discovered them. Just one of his impulsive walks after pulling the truck off the road. But now

when he looked through his binoculars—then switched to the telephoto lens, which was slightly more powerful—he saw that his speculation had been confirmed. The animal they had been hunting was a wolf.

It now appeared they had succeeded. Carl got up and moved closer, risking a better look at the body.

Just when he was certain that no life remained and that the poison which killed the animal had been sprinkled on a butchered steer not far away, the wolf opened one of its eyes and looked at him. The iris was electric yellow under a darkening sky.

After a few minutes Carl bent and closed the eye so it would not be struck by rain.

**D**on Coffey loved to drive, too. He kept his window down even on the expressway and rested his left hand on the side view mirror to feel the breeze. The scent of wildflowers was all around him, swirling like dust in the cab of his pickup. The duffel bag, stuffed fat with money, was on the seat next to him. He resisted the urge to look at it repeatedly. But it seemed to pull at his attention anyway, making him swerve to catch the right exit.


The sky was thundering again, the air beginning to smell like ozone. And there were big rocks all around, glowing orange and red in the twilight as if lit from within.

It felt good to be dissolving the familiar routines. There had been a sensation of falling when the deal on the company had been finalized:

a dream of cables being sliced so that he had begun to plummet, feeling cut loose and free. Telephones no longer plagued him as they had even amid the dust and concrete of the job sites. Clocks no longer mattered. There was just the new job in San Diego, and three days more than he would need to get to that. The other arrangements there were already set: living space rented and prepared, the few possessions sent and delivered. Another life, waiting for him to step into it, the previous one peeled away and discarded.

Carl would ask him why. And he knew he would answer, but in a slow way. The first pieces of it on Carl's back porch, watching for rattlers and sipping from bottles of beer. The rest in Mexico, amid blazing sun and dark, cool bars.

Now he came to a stoplight at the edge of town. He put his foot on the brake, leaned over and checked his written directions. Follow the horseshoe arc of Cordura Parkway through downtown past the old adobe architecture, the paint-cracked billboards, and the Spanish soft drink ads faded against the sides of buildings. Find another road and turn right. Then find the address, and hope that Old Man Carl was home.

f course there were no guarantees. That's what the driver of another pickup thought as he leaned into the accelerator, wishing this particular errand were over. There were no guarantees—not when you set out to do this kind of work and not when you partnered

with Max Perch, who now sat in the passenger seat with a rifle between his legs, its barrel knocking against the door.

There were no guarantees of success, payment, or safety.

"You have to cradle it, don't you?" said the driver, irritated, as he glanced at the weapon in his partner's lap. "You have to carry it like you're in love with it."

"I am in love with it," Perch said, lifting the gun so he could mockingly put his lips to it. "You know that."

I've known it for a long time, thought the driver.

And he had. During the decades they had worked together it was always there, a cruelty that flickered inside his partner's heart like wildfire. Max Perch, exterminator extraordinaire: sometimes he drank whisky until his throat felt like fire, and sometimes he gave slurred, mocking speeches about the Lord.

Other times he swerved at coyotes in the road.

He had been that way even when they were on friendlier terms. That's when Perch had tagged him with the nickname that had lasted for so long: *abuelo*, or grandfather, because of his affinity for restraint and his calls for Perch to contain himself. He might have been christened as the *abuelo* on the night in New Mexico when Perch had split a man's skull outside a bar. Or it might have been another night. There were so many incidents—times when he had tried to curb Perch's behavior—that with age they no longer seemed clear. Nor did they seem to matter. All that seemed to matter was getting there,

getting this job done, and saying goodbye to Max Perch once and for ever.

But it was never that easy, and it wouldn't be this time either. The *abuelo* realized that when they saw the other truck by the side of the highway. A chain of nerves trembled along his spine. This was trouble, and it was only by chance they had become aware of it. Usually the *abuelo* parked at another entry point to the valley. This route had been a variation, a different approach that had occurred to him as more direct.

"Everyone out here drives a pickup truck," said Perch, already opening the passenger door. "Ever notice?"

The *abuelo* didn't answer. He stepped outside the truck with Perch and squinted into the distance. They walked several yards and stopped, with rain beginning to come down fast.

"You see him?" Perch looked at the *abuelo* and put on a wide-brimmed hat.

"I see him," the *abuelo* said, feeling a sharp twist inside himself. "Let's not worry. He'll go away."

"You're right," Perch said, almost laughing. "He will."

He loped off in the direction of the old man, leaving the *abuelo* to feel helpless. Not this time, the *abuelo* thought. Please not this time.

But his thoughts could not stop Perch from going down the other side of the hill in his choppy, short-legged stride. Nor could they stop the sounds that echoed off the rocks when Perch began to swing his rifle at the old man's head.

"You're all wet."  
"You noticed."  
Don Coffey leaned back in the booth

and checked the nametag of the waitress. He had asked for one of her tables only knowing her name, not what she looked like.

"It's Katie, right?"

"That's it." She set down his iced tea and leaned past him to look at the rain outside the window. "It's dark out there."

"I got caught in it waiting for a friend," Coffey said. "He told me in advance that if he wasn't home I should come here. He said to ask for you."

The diner was filled with the sounds of plates and silverware, crowds and conversation. Katie had dark blonde hair that was short but just long enough to bounce when she walked. She moved with quickness and energy.

Now she took an exaggerated step back, playful but cautious.

"And who might your friend be?"

"An old guy named Carl. He said he drives into the desert with your father every Friday to sit under a big rock and drink busthead whisky all afternoon."

"That would definitely be Carl." She stepped back to the edge of the table with lowered shoulders, relaxed again. "But the whisky is a lie. Wishful thinking, I take it."

"He was expecting me, but I didn't give an exact date. I used to help him run a contracting business in Florida."

He saw her gaze drop to the stuffed duffel that sat across from him, then jump back to his own.

There was a contour of expression to her face—a degree of detail in the features—that he had not noticed before. At first he had thought her to be twenty years old. Now he guessed thirty.

“You’re staying with Carl?” she asked.

“If he comes home. Otherwise, care to recommend a hotel?”

She did, and it was the one right behind the diner, across an expanse of black asphalt that was beginning to glisten in the rain. When she stepped away to take another order, Coffey watched her walk and wondered if Carl had been cagey and kind enough to plan this meeting with her.

Then he saw police flashers from the corner of his eye and turned to the window as they went streaking down the road—in the direction of Carl’s house.

“I’ve got a bad feeling,” he said when Katie returned. “I don’t know why.”

“You’re going to check on him again?” Katie said. “Don’t forget your duffel bag.” She smiled at him. It was the first sign of an eerie intuition she seemed to have.

Sheriff Jack Reynolds and Deputy Edgar Flores circled the home of Old Man Carl, using flashlights and pausing often. Rain pelted their hats before drizzling off the brims. Both had parked their cars with the headlights aimed at the small house. The headlights were left on, and every few seconds the sky went blue with lightning while they examined the side door, the porch in front, and the porch in back.

“The old man lived alone,” Flores said. “There’s nobody here.”

Reynolds nodded. There was a small gate in front of the property, and both of them had noticed that it was left open. It was possible Carl had done that himself.

But inside themselves, both policemen felt a slow uncoiling when a truck stopped in front of the house and a man they had never seen got out.

He was tall and built like a carpenter: all knots and cords. That was clear even through jeans, a T-shirt, and windbreaker. When he saw them, he stood in front of a police car between the headlights.

“Stay there,” Reynolds said loudly while Flores raised his flashlight so the beam went into the man’s face. Reynolds kept his hand free on the holster side of his belt. “What are you doing out here, sir?”

The man squinted. “I’m looking for the man who lives here,” he said. “I’m his friend.”

Edgar Flores moved forward, said a few words, and examined the man’s identification.

“Carl isn’t here, Mr. Coffey. Was he expecting you?”

Coffey nodded, and finally Jack Reynolds came closer, too.

“I’ll take him with me,” Reynolds said to the deputy.

“If I could follow in my truck, that’s better for me,” Coffey said, thinking of the duffel bag and the money. “Where are we going?”

The police officers looked at each other briefly.

“The hospital,” Reynolds said.

Coffey noticed the noises first.

Standing inside the curtain that was drawn around the bed, he heard so many electronic chirps, chimes, and bells that the machines surrounding Carl seemed more in need of attention than the person attached to them. But Carl's jaw was discolored, and his eye sockets seemed to have deepened. A clear tube leading into one of his nostrils was taped above his lip, and half his face was badly swollen.

"I knew I was right," Carl said in a whisper. "But it broke my heart to see the proof of it."

"Proof of what, Carl? The sheriff said you were beaten but you crawled to the side of the road. He said you were robbed."

Carl's eyes flickered. "My wallet's gone?"

"That's how they knew it was a robbery," Coffey said. "But they need a better description of—"

"I wasn't robbed." He turned his eyes upward, toward the pinholes in the tileboard ceiling. There were boot-shaped enclosures around his legs that a nurse had said were used to prevent blood clots. They inflated and deflated rhythmically, every three minutes, and there was noise from the pump that operated them.

"I've got your money," Coffey said. "I brought it in cash. It was supposed to be . . . an eccentric surprise."

"Why did you sell the company?" Carl asked. "Why did you drive here just to deliver my share?"

Don Coffey was silent. He saw his reflection in the window across the room, dark hair out of place, nose not quite straight, deepset eyes not ready to meet Carl's and

tell him how things in Florida had gone bad.

"That story can wait," he said.

"Listen," Carl responded. "There's too much for me to tell right now. Most of what you'll need is at my house. You can start there and get back with me. If you need help before then, get in touch with Bill Cleary. I've mentioned him to you before. His daughter, Katie, is the one at the restaurant. I should be out of here soon enough—"

"Carl, it looks like you're going to be here awhile."

"Just get to the house," he said in a voice that was suddenly strained and loud. "And for God's sake, don't trust the sheriff. Not now."

Carl aimed his eyes at a shelf across the room. His trousers were folded there, beneath a window on which rivulets of rain had left long, streaking trails. Coffey looked for house keys in the pockets but could not find them.

The old man told him where to find the spare, outside the house.

"Be careful when you get there," he said. "And get the locks changed tomorrow morning."

Coffey stepped out of the Intensive Care Unit to the hall where Jack Reynolds was waiting.

"Anything?" the sheriff said.

"He didn't seem to think it was a robbery." Coffey followed the sheriff to a row of chairs near an elevator. Reynolds had a sharp chin cut like a V and was sipping from a Styrofoam cup.

"Ninety-nine percent of all trouble in those hills has to do with wetbacks and smugglers," he said. "The truth is, I've got a district attorney

who's still damp enough behind the ears to think I can do something about that. So it's the angle I'll be forced to pursue unless your friend comes up with a better story—or any story at all.”

Coffey nodded and concentrated on the sheriff's eyes, which were small and deeply set under eyebrows that had turned the color of cigarette ash long ago. His irritable and dismissive manner made Coffey imagine him as someone likely to punish small children severely for minor infractions. As if to complement the thought, he noticed a tarnished wedding band on the sheriff's ring finger.

“Carl's always gone at things in his own way, sheriff. But I can't imagine him involved with thieves and smugglers. It's too dramatic.”

Reynolds shook his head. His lips were as dry as parchment. “It doesn't have to be dramatic. We're not talking about jewel smugglers or arms dealers. We're talking about people who would run barefoot over barbed wire to get to a better life. So let's say your friend is out on one of the walks you say he takes. And he meets one or a group of them who seem very desperate, very needy, and very thankful. Then he turns his back, they decide they want whatever is in his wallet, and one of them picks up a rock.”

“I doubt it,” Coffey said. He wanted to see how Reynolds would react to a contrary statement.

The sheriff's eyes widened, then contracted, a small flare he was able to control.

“Where are you staying?” Reynolds said.

Coffey gave the name of the hotel.

“Get in touch if you want to know whether we find out anything.” Reynolds punched the button for the elevator. “The land your friend was on happens to be private property. That could be trouble for him, too.”

After Reynolds was gone, the doctor who had first examined Carl came out of the ICU. Coffey had not seen him go in.

“Like I told the sheriff, there's no way to tell,” he said. “With all that tissue damage, there are going to be some internal injuries. If he turns out to be a bleeder, there may not be much we can do.”

The doctor looked tiredly at the hips of a nurse passing in the hall. He was young, but his eyes and forehead had already accumulated a network of creases and lines.

“I'm sorry,” he said after a moment. “I should have phrased that differently. Are you a friend?”

“I am.”

The young doctor nodded.

“Keep your fingers crossed,” he said.

Time passed. The *abuelo* tried to keep track of it as they sat in his truck, parked down the street from Old Man Carl's house in the dark. Each sweep of the second hand was a minute off his life. The notion of working with Perch had been bad enough. But now, since Perch had lost himself in beating the old man—falling into it, like a fit of lust—the *abuelo* wanted desperately to get home and get loose



of Perch. He did not want to keep seeing, over and over in his mind, Perch's gruesome dispatch of the animal's body. And he had not wanted to come here, afterward. But he had realized it was necessary.

"Max," he said. "I want to ask a favor. I want you to take it easy from here on out."

Perch shifted in his seat. "Why?"

"Because I've had enough of this sick little job, that's why. Because I feel like it's shortening my life."

"That's what you *feel* like, is it?" Perch shook his head. "Christ. Complaining about your feelings."

He was out the door before the *abuelo* could respond. He loped up the street directly toward the old man's house. There had been a light in back since their arrival half an hour ago. They were at the right address, the *abuelo* knew that, and Perch had checked the old man's wallet. But it was not smart to plunge ahead. Even if the old man had been carrying on a surveillance—even if, by some chance, he had made records—they should know who was in the house before breaking in.

Perch didn't care. The interior was dry and cool, with a living room lined with shelves of collected record albums, the smell of thin cardboard and vinyl. The front door had been locked, but Perch had found the right key among those taken from the old man's pocket. Now he moved slowly on the hardwood floor. The heels of his snakeskin boots were heavy, and he did not want to alert whoever was down the hall.

The *abuelo* reluctantly entered the living room but did not stay be-

hind his partner. He noticed a duffel bag as Perch disappeared into the lighted corridor, and he reached to inspect it, finding the bag curiously out of place in the living room.

The sounds of struggle from the back of the house came suddenly, as jarring as thunder. The walls shuddered. By the time the *abuelo* had looked inside the duffel, taken it to his truck, and managed to fit it squarely behind the driver's seat, Max Perch was moving very slowly out of the back room.

"Where were you?" Perch said, meeting the *abuelo* on the front steps. "The son of a bitch punched me in the groin."

"Did you kill him?"

"I don't kill people," Perch said, quietly limping from the house, having found what they needed. "I draw the line way before that."

*Liar*, the *abuelo* thought.

When the man had come quickly through the doorway, Don Coffey felt himself very foolish very fast. Fatigue had crept up on him during the drive from the hospital. His defenses were down. He had found the spare key by the front porch, had locked the door behind him, and had expected no further problems. He'd planned to call a locksmith in the morning.

The man's chest looked as thick as a wine barrel when he came around the corner, his shirt open four buttons from the collar. He wore expensive cowboy boots and looked shockingly old. But the heavy snakeskin boots planted themselves quickly, and when the right

one swung high at Coffey's head, he had only a moment in which to push himself back, seated in the swivel chair at Carl's desk. The maneuver would have worked completely had the wheels of the chair not caught on a rug in the middle of the room. He tipped backward and felt the cowboy on him quickly, one of those hard snakeskin heels driven into his chest. He drove a fist upward and caught the man between the legs so squarely that the coughing began instantly. He began to get up. But the cowboy managed to lean forward and swing an elbow that connected with his jaw. Darkness came quickly.

He had got to his feet, wrapped ice in a towel, and found that his tongue had finally stopped bleeding when the knock came on the door.

"Oh," said Katie, the waitress from the restaurant, eyebrows lifting softly as she stood under the porchlight. "Are you all right?"

Her hand went to her throat, then to the side of Coffey's jaw. He let her in. Then watched with slow relief as she moved through the kitchen with the comfort of having been there before.

She brought more ice in a fresh towel, aspirin from a bottle he had been unable to find, and glasses of tea from the refrigerator.

"It's got to be three in the morning," Coffey said slowly, feeling his tongue as thick as a sponge from where he'd bitten it, after being hit.

"It's only two," Katie replied, still peering at him closely, the lamp in the living room providing only dim light. "My shift at the restaurant just ended. I thought I'd swing by to

see if things looked okay. Then I didn't see Carl's truck out front, and I just thought I should check in ..."

"You stepped into this place like you're pretty comfortable here."

"My father is close with Carl. And I live with my father, so we bring my kids here quite a bit—kind of like extended family."

Coffey tilted his head back slowly, again testing the jaw. Kids, he thought. But living with her father.

"Carl mentioned your father at the hospital. I'm sure that means I can trust you."

Her manner was unselfconscious while she listened to what had happened—her focus on what Coffey said rather than what her reaction should be. He noticed the subtle changes in the set of her eyebrows and the depth that was added to her face by the shadows and light of the room. She wore no makeup and was still in the polo shirt and khaki shorts that served as her work uniform.

"You're saying the cowboy attacked you after you came from the hospital to find out what Carl was doing?"

"That's it." Coffey dropped the ice towel to the floor. "Cowboy. That's almost comical. But there was nothing funny about this guy." He thought of the missing duffel bag but did not mention it. "He took everything I'd found in Carl's desk drawer. Mostly it was a collection of photographs that showed the same landscape, over and over. But he missed this."

Coffey showed her: one print, with two men at a distance. They

were little more than silhouettes with their backs turned, but the shorter of the two was built thickly and wore the heavy boots.

"The cowboy?" Katie said.

"It sure looks like him." They peered at the print under the light. Katie studied it for a long time.

"No idea about the other man," Coffey said, leaning back. "We can't see his face, and it's from so far away I might not recognize him if we passed on the street. But Carl also kept a notebook in his desk. It wasn't much more than dates and times along with the mention of a valley between here and Mexico. The cowboy took it. But there was something in there about Carl watching these guys, referring to them as trappers."

Katie leaned back from the light, holding the photograph. "Poachers, maybe?"

"Maybe. Carl had written that they were hunting a wolf. Is that possible here? Are there wolves running free?"

Katie handed the photo back and shook her head slowly. "That's the sort of thing you should talk to my father about. He used to work for the state government—Fish and Wildlife, I think."

In an odd moment of silence Coffey felt himself slip into drowsiness. The cone of light in the small, dark house reminded him of a twilight spent with someone else, not so long ago.

He stood up, and the memory burst apart like tiny flares of light.

"It's late," he said. "I don't think the cowboy will be back, but I'm heading to the hotel just the same."

"You're not going to call the sheriff?"

Coffey shook his head. "I don't like his attitude about Carl. I'd like to check around first, and talk to your father."

Katie told him she could set up a meeting, then shrugged and indicated her restaurant uniform.

"You know where to find me," she said.

**T**he rancher who had hired Max Perch adjusted his weight in the chair behind his desk, positioning himself in the warmth of the morning sun. Long, bright rays came flooding through his office window. But it was not enough to calm him. He had expected problems with Perch, that was understood. But now there were complications. He drummed his fingers on the desk while eyeing the lines of woodgrain on the wall panels.

When Perch finally arrived, thirty minutes late, the rancher could smell him from across the desk. He carried a small backpack over his shoulder.

"You wanted proof that I caught the animal," Perch said.

He dropped a folded, triangular object on the rancher's desk that was pliant, like a piece of felt.

"It's an ear," Perch said.

The rancher thrust his jaw forward, keeping his eyes on the wood-grain panels.

"I've got the head in here if you need to see that, too," Perch added, dropping the backpack from his shoulder.

Finally the rancher reached for

one of the drawers on the right side of his desk. In the top drawer was a cashier's check. In the other, a nine-millimeter handgun wrapped in oilcloth.

He opened the top drawer.

After plucking the check from between the rancher's fingers, Perch instructed him to produce another one with an added zero.

"What you see there is the amount we agreed upon," the rancher said. "You can forget about shaking me down for more. You were hired for a piece of work. It's done, and so are we."

"I don't think I was hired for a piece of work," Perch answered, swinging the backpack once again to his shoulder. "I think I was hired because you want to keep this quiet. You don't want any attention from tree huggers, Fish and Wildlife, or INS. I wouldn't either if my hands were as filthy as yours."

The rancher leaned forward and steepled his fingers.

"It works both ways, Max. I got a call from Jack Reynolds less than an hour ago. It seems there was some trouble on my property last night. An old man was badly beaten out there. Exactly what did you think you were accomplishing when you were doing that, by the way?"

Perch shrugged.

"What I'm saying, Max, is that you aren't really very smart. If any of this comes down, Reynolds is going to care a lot more about assault and battery than a rancher making a mistake in handling a wolf that was feeding off his cattle. I'll say I'm sorry, pay their fines, and promise to do it right next time."

"You could go to jail."

The rancher shook his head. "Reynolds isn't going to bother me unless somebody lights a fire under him. Even then, I can buy a good defense. That's one of the differences between you and me, Max. I've got a lawyer."

There was a hesitation in Perch's wild eyes that made the rancher draw a satisfied breath.

It was time to give him the last piece of it and hope that was enough.

"One more thing, Max. I lied to you about something. If Reynolds comes to see you, it won't be for assault and battery. It will be for murder. That old man you beat up died early this morning."

When the voice on the other end told him of Carl's death, Don Coffey hung up the phone and felt himself recede into the silence of his hotel room. He stared at the curtains by the air conditioner and stepped into the bathroom. He let the shower rain like needles against his skin, hot, then cold. Then he chewed four aspirin, dressed, and stepped into the brutal daylight of the parking lot. Fragments of glass glittered like diamonds on the asphalt.

Wolin was expecting him in San Diego. So was a landlord, a leasing company, a bank account, and the remnants of furniture he'd shipped from Florida. The job offer from Wolin had been standing and had come more than a year ago after he had visited several of the Florida sites. Wolin had been shocked when Cof-

fey finally accepted—moments of silence and a faint buzzing over the phone—but then he'd been pleased.

Now he would have to wait. Coffey felt the muscles of his jaw clenched against the bone. The diner where Katie worked was two hundred yards from the hotel, open twenty-four hours, but when he stopped there, he learned she would not start her shift until midafternoon. He looked back at the hotel, a ready-made, heat-shimmering rectangle with an old ballfield at one end of it, probably zoned for redevelopment. He walked to his truck and sat inside the suffocating warmth, still for just a moment. Think about what you know how to do, he told himself.

He drove onto Rafael Cordura Parkway, the main street in town. It took him past one story Spanish houses, parched bits of empty, undeveloped property, and, closer to downtown, alleys bordered by red-brick and clay-tile buildings so close together they made the spaces between seem impossibly narrow: cracks of darkness guarded by broken pay phones, graffiti, and bits of litter that swirled in the wind. But there were also a few glittering blocks of development on the high arc of the road. A library, a county building, a city hall.

Coffey found the listings he needed at the registrar of deeds. He felt some of his tension diminishing at the familiarity of the task, not unlike research he'd done for his own development proposals. Most of the machines that read the microfiche didn't work. Most of the clerks were surly.

He lost track of time and eventually realized he'd gotten a late start. By the time he returned to the restaurant Katie had begun her shift.

"Hey," she said when she saw him. "How's your headache?"

He told her about Carl and saw the color flood into her face. She turned away, but only for a moment.

"I'm going to see if someone can cover for me," she said. "Can you wait?"

She drove behind him to Carl's house, which seemed very still in the late afternoon. The living room was filled with beams of sunlight.

"You don't have to do this," Coffey said.

"It's okay. My dad and I were the closest friends he had here. He never mentioned family."

"Not to me, either."

It was too early to begin going through his possessions, packing away the record collection and sorting the financial statements. But there was the shared impulse between them to do something—to feel something—even if only by thumbing the corners of album sleeves, touching the objects that held the slow, punchy jazz the old man had listened to.

"It's strange to be off work at this time," Katie said. "I have two kids—two young boys at daycare right now. Carl used to like playing with them. Maybe sorting out his affairs should be our responsibility, Don. You're the one who doesn't have to—"

"Except I owe him." Coffey found an icetray, dropped the cubes into

a pair of Mason jars, and filled them from the pitcher of iced tea that was still in the refrigerator. "It's not something I thought I should bring up before. But when I arrived here, I had that duffel bag you saw. It was filled with money."

Katie accepted her jar of tea and sipped carefully, eyes narrowing on the glass. "You're going to tell me the cowboy took it last night?"

"Someone did. The money was Carl's. He agreed to let me sell the business we ran along with a couple of other partners. But he did that on faith. I never told him why I wanted to sell. As much as anything else, I came out here to give him an explanation. So that's what I owe. Along with other things, which go way back."

Katie sat near the lamp where they had looked at the photo of the two men the night before. Coffey thought for a moment, then remembered he had locked the photo in the glove box of his truck.

"You came out here just to give him the money?"

He drank from his glass, ice cubes clinking. "I'm on my way to a new job in San Diego."

Again her eyes narrowed. The shorts of her uniform came to her knees, and she wore white tennis shoes beneath them. The muscles under the skin of her calves worked like silk ropes.

"So you're going from running a business to working for someone else? But aren't you someone who's used to working on his own?"

He drank from his glass again, letting a piece of ice slide onto his tongue. "I found out that one of the

men Carl and I were partners with was stealing. Much of it from the fourth partner, in a way I didn't recognize for a long time. That's why I got us out, and it's part of what I came here to explain. The rest of it is the part I didn't know how Carl would react to: the thief never went to prison, and the other partner never found out."

"Is that because of some legal thing?"

She kept her voice bland, but Coffey had begun to notice the small, searching movements of her eyes, almost digital in their precision. He was starting to realize how quickly she perceived things.

"Nothing else happened because I didn't tell anybody," he said. "The thief was a friend. I couldn't send him to prison even though . . ."

"It's what he deserved?"

Coffey nodded.

"Maybe you should have just come out with what happened," Katie said. "And then let a judge or jury take it from there."

He felt the stab of that but didn't dislike her for saying it.

And he wondered if she perceived more of it then. If it was plain to her that his feeling of freedom—of having been cut loose from the responsibilities and routines—was melting into uneasiness.

Don't think about it now, he told himself. But he knew Carl's death was working on him: the certainty with which he'd made recent choices was beginning to fade.

He wanted to read Katie's eyes, to understand what they were seeing with their digital movements, so small and precise.



"I should go," she said not long after that, looking back at him.

But her eyes continued to linger.

The return to the hotel was quiet and solitary. Traffic had increased, but it seemed at the far end of a long corridor. Coffey was aware of his hands on the wheel, his still-sore jaw, the jags of tension building in his neck. He fought the fatigue with sharp memories of Carl in the ICU.

He parked outside his room, saw the empty police cruiser in a nearby space, and put his key to the door lock.

Sheriff Jack Reynolds and Deputy Edgar Flores were seated by a small table in the room. The air conditioning was on high, and the fan blew cold wind at the hair on their arms.

"What happened to you?" Reynolds said, tapping a finger on his chin.

"It was the guy who beat up Carl," Coffey said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "He broke into Carl's house."

Reynolds leaned closer.

"You decided not to report that as a crime?"

"You seemed pretty suspicious of Carl at the hospital, sheriff. Why the hard sell? He was the victim here."

Coffey saw Edgar Flores watching the sheriff closely.

"He was the victim," Reynolds said. "Except he wouldn't come clean about what happened in those hills. And you wouldn't report an assault by the man who probably attacked him. That's supposed to make me take both of you at your word?"

The sheriff's hands remained steady, but waves of crimson were rising around his throat. Deputy Flores shifted in his chair.

"All right," Coffey said. "You want to know more? I'll tell you what you already know. The land that Carl was attacked on belongs to a man named John Clintock. He's a rancher. A prominent one, I gather. Probably with enough weight to influence how the sheriff's office serves this city. My theory is that Carl found out Clintock had hired a pair of trappers to kill a wolf that had wandered onto his property. But I guess you'd rather question me than him. I figure you for the kind of guy who's quick to buckle under pressure, Jack. Is that what you're looking for?"

Reynolds stood, knees locking below the thighs. The waves of color had spread up around his jaw.

"Try me," Coffey said.

The sheriff swung with an open palm, downward at his face. Coffey caught his wrist and remained motionless when the sheriff drew the extendable steel baton from his belt with the other hand. The metal rod shot out like a piston.

"You're the witness, Edgar," Coffey said quickly.

Reynolds stopped. Flores was half out of his chair, crouched between standing and sitting. He straightened cautiously, whispered the sheriff's name, and watched Reynolds push the baton back to size.

"The old man probably had a smart mouth, too," Reynolds said before they left. "But you know what? He's not using it any more."

A day later Max Perch went into his favorite bar in Nogales, Mexico. It was early afternoon with sunshine pouring out of the sky like yellow fire. He relished the darkness of the bar, as cool as a cave. The bartender watched him. He always watched him. Perch couldn't remember why. There had been a fight in this bar, he thought. But it was years ago. And it had been just one fight.

When the bartender handed over his messages, his hand looked as worn as old wood. Perch wondered if it was shaking from fear, or if the tremble in the bartender's wrist was merely something that came with age. He looked at the scrap of paper and saw the *abuelo* had returned his call, then began plugging coins into a corner pay phone.

"I've got something else I'd like your help with," Perch said when the *abuelo* answered. "It pays well."

There was a pause.

"Just a visit to a local businessman," Perch added. "He doesn't know I use you as a partner. But what I have in mind will work better with both of us there."

"You're talking about blackmail?"

"I'm talking about raising our fees."

"You can count me out," the *abuelo* said.

"I need you."

"Oh, that's flattering."

Perch tightened his grip on the receiver.

"You don't have a choice."

"I told you this was going to be our last deal, Max. I told you I didn't want any more work. I meant it."

Perch eased his grip. "How's your family?" he said.

There was a sigh on the other end. The *abuelo* had heard that threat before. But he took his time responding.

"Max, how about a compromise?"

Perch was silent.

"I'll buy my way out," the *abuelo* said. "How about that? I'll buy Clintock's way out, too. If it's money you want, I'll keep you from going to the trouble."

"You can't do that," Perch answered. "If we're talking money, you don't have enough."

"You don't know how much I have," the *abuelo* said.

Bill Cleary had the same contour of expression as his daughter. But the lines were deeper and the skin darker, like tanned leather. The same rivers that cut canyons in the earth seemed to have worked in small scale on his face and hands. He met Don Coffey at his front door in the middle of the day. Katie was at work.

"Her boys don't have a father," he said. "What I mean is, he's not around. In case you've wondered."

Coffey felt a creeping embarrassment until Bill Cleary laughed from deep in his lungs. "Sorry," he said, eyebrows arching as he smiled. "But she likes you. Come around back to the porch."

The house was flat-roofed, with a look of scorched adobe clay on the outside. The back porch was wide, with screens on three sides and a view of distant rocks and hills.

"The bottom line on wolves in the

Southwest? There aren't any left. At least not any that are wild in the true sense. I hear that not too long ago about a dozen were released with radio collars. Part of a reintroduction plan. But to come across one running wild, without a collar? It would be hard to exaggerate the improbability of that. I can see why Carl didn't want to tell anyone about it until he had proof, if that's what he actually found."

They sat in porch chairs while Cleary paused to look into the distance. A glass of milk was positioned beneath his chair.

"All out of whisky?" Coffey said.

Cleary smiled after a moment. "It was just a joke between Carl and me. We used to tell people we got drunk every Friday out in the desert—some kind of old man ritual or something. Now it's all baby food for me. An ulcer or something."

He stopped to reach for the glass, and the arching eyebrows became level.

"The Mexican gray wolf was eradicated in Arizona a hundred years ago," he said. "There were so many wolves here then I've heard stories about ranchers sprinkling poison around dead cattle and finding the corpses of wolves spread around them a few days later. After that, the eradication was sanctioned by the government in the early 1900's. Only a few were taken after 1960."

"And those were taken by the government?"

Cleary nodded. "The trappers were called predator control agents, from a department or division called Animal Damage Control."

"Katie said you retired from Fish

and Wildlife. You weren't a predator control agent?"

Katie's father drank again from the glass of milk, tendons operating visibly on the top of his forearm.

"I was an administrator."

"You look like you've done some work outdoors."

"Here and there, mostly in retirement. You've got a bit of that look yourself."

Coffey didn't want the conversation to get away from him. "I've heard there might be wolves left in Mexico. Aren't wolves travelers? Couldn't one have wandered up here, or been attracted by those with the radio collars?"

"The last survey was almost twenty years ago. The trapper who did it guessed there were fifty down there, maybe a couple of hundred miles from the border. It's a long way to go."

"But if there were just one, and a rancher didn't want to attract the attention of reporting it, he might decide he could get away with killing it. Especially if people were unlikely to believe it existed."

"Maybe. Of course, they're a protected species. Killing one is a year in prison and fifty thousand dollars in fines on the criminal side. Something like twenty-five thousand on the civil side. That's a lot to balance against the cost of losing a few cattle."

"Unless you're a prominent citizen with other things to hide. Carl didn't tell you he thought there was a wolf out there?"

Bill Cleary looked out at the far-away sunburned rocks extending to the horizon. "We hadn't talked in a

few weeks. We were due to see each other. Now I'm sorry I let it slide."

Coffey started to say something else, thought better of it, and decided to show the photograph he'd been keeping in the glove box of his truck. There was a tremor in Cleary's wrist when he held it.

"Is something wrong?"

"Sorry," he said. "I'm still thinking about Carl. It's hard to identify anyone from this, since it was taken from so far away with their backs turned. I just wish he'd told me."

He returned the photo and forced his eyebrows to rise again, spreading his hands slowly. "I meant it when I said Katie likes you. If there is anything more we can do—"

"Do you know anyone who worked for ADC or who would know how to hunt a wolf?"

Bill Cleary took his empty glass of milk into the house, closed the door behind him, and returned with a list of names he'd written on lined notebook paper.

**T**here was no secretary, no foreman or guard in an outer office to notify John Clintock when visitors arrived. He kept a regular appointment schedule himself, managing the time accordingly. An affinity for precision possessed him, a feeling of satisfaction upon drawing a measured line through an appointment's name, closing the leather-bound datebook, and moving to the next task. He didn't care for surprises.

He could hear most vehicles approach through the same window that gave entry to the morning sun-

light, and if a man wore boots with heavy heels on the walkway outside, he sometimes heard that, too. If it happened when there were no names in the leatherbound book, he pulled open the second drawer on the right side of his desk, just to be sure.

The nine-millimeter semiautomatic was always there, a reassuring presence. He didn't consider using it much because there were usually other options.

Usually.

When he heard the boots this time, he followed the routine, touched the handle of the weapon, then closed the drawer all but a half inch. When Max Perch came through the door, Clintock pretended to peer at legal documents under the mahogany-based lamp he'd purchased on a trip two years ago.

"I'm not going to let you waste my time," he said, making a point of not looking up. "We've already had our final conversation."

He knew Perch was close from the sound of his breathing.

"I thought you'd like to reconsider."

There was something different about his voice, although he sounded calm.

"Forget it, Max. You've been paid."

Perch's thighs pressed against the desk.

"You don't know the *abuelo*, do you? At least, not by name."

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't even know him, and he tried to buy your safety. Can you imagine that?"

Clintock raised his head, stared vaguely at the lines of woodgrain

on the wall panels. He guided the second drawer on the right side of the desk open, very smoothly. He felt for the gun.

"Get out of here, Max."

"You should think about this. All I want is—"

The rancher drew the gun from the drawer quickly, fully aware that when he had it aimed at Perch's chest, he was going to fire it. The hell with the mess, the problems, the lies to avoid the explanations. Perch could not be dismissed in any other way. There was time to consider that in the fraction of a second that it took to raise the gun and point it.

There just wasn't time to pull the trigger.

Once he left Bill and Katie Cleary's house, mid-afternoon faded quickly to early evening for Don Coffey.

Cleary had written down seven names for him. The first included a partial address: vague directions and a highway number. Coffey drove to the glittering buildings on the high arc of Cordura Parkway and went to work on the other six, a blur of combing through phone books, Internet search engines, records of landowners in the county. He made phone calls to those names for which he'd found phone numbers, then hung up on the answering machines. He wasn't sure what he would have said had anyone answered. At least three names seemed to be legitimate possibilities. Four if you counted the one with the partial address, for which

he'd been unable to find a phone number.

Now what?

He went from the frigid air conditioning of a big lobby through the sliding doors and into the diminishing heat of the day. Again he thought of Wolin and the life that seemed to be waiting in California. It was reasonably planned. Forget the business back east. Get a decent job, decent home. Decent wife. But it was becoming a mold he could see himself fitting into only superficially.

What happened when Wolin began giving him orders that he knew were wrong? What happened when he woke up in a beautifully generic site condo next to a beautifully generic wife with thoughts that still ran wild—thoughts of what could have been if he'd handled the business differently in Florida or if he'd started it over again?

He drove back to the diner by the hotel, pushing himself back into the problems at hand.

Katie saw him when he walked into the restaurant. She seated him and took extra time at the table.

"Your father's a good man," Coffey said.

"I don't know what I'd do without him." Katie looked at her shoe tops. "He's been helping me support the boys since their father left."

Coffey nodded slowly.

When she asked how his search was progressing, he thought it was strange courtesy more than interest. But he answered, telling her that he had three addresses to check—or three and a half, counting the partial.

"There are other steps I can take. A guy like this who clocked me and took it to Carl, he's got to be known somewhere. I can ask around the local bars or nightclubs maybe."

Katie looked past him, out a window.

"Are you okay?"

"Sure. I was just thinking about Carl," she said, refocusing. "So what happens from here? I mean, after this is over. You just go on to California?"

"What else would I do?"

Thin lines appeared as brackets around her mouth. "I'm sorry I asked."

She went away. When she returned, her eyes were clear, her attention undivided.

"The whole thing has me upset. And the way you're looking for these men. I don't think it's—"

"I'll be careful, Katie. And I think I can trust the sheriff's deputy, if I need to."

She waited a moment, then nodded.

"Katie, I need to ask you something. When I showed you the picture Carl had taken of those two men, you spent a long time looking at it. Are you sure you didn't recognize either of them?"

"Not at the time," she said. "But I have been thinking about it more. The taller, thinner one? He could be a guy who used to work on John Clintock's ranch. But I'm not sure."

"You don't know his name?"

She shook her head. "He used to come in here sometimes, so I've seen him around. But I don't know him."

Coffey followed her gaze out the

window. A sheriff's car had entered the parking lot.

"Friend of yours?" she said.

"I can't see the driver." Coffey angled his neck as the car drove behind the restaurant toward the hotel. A few minutes later, it came back. Jack Reynolds entered the restaurant.

"I'll let you pay your bill and step outside before I put the cuffs on," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"You're under arrest, son. Suspicion of murder."

**T**he *abuelo* had arrived at Max Perch's home late that afternoon. He did it from memory, cutting off the highway onto an unimproved road and raising a column of dust as he drove into a solitary core of canyons.

He had the windows down and noticed that part of the sky had been taken over by thick, heavy clouds. Another storm was building.

Perch's place wasn't much different from the way he remembered it. The trailer had settled so firmly at the base of a mesquite-peppered hill that the ground seemed to have risen up to meet it. Weeds and cactus grew along the sides. An oil drum that had been split open to use as a grill was rusting in front of the door.

Perch was waiting inside. "You've got it with you?"

"Right here." The *abuelo* dropped Coffey's duffel bag on the floor. "Take a look."

Perch did. "You weren't going to tell me about this?"



"Now I have, Max. All right? I took it out of the old man's house while you were kicking the hell out of the old man's friend. And you know what? I'm glad I did. Because now I can give it to you and use it to seal our deal."

"Clintock means that much to you?"

"Not getting into any more trouble means something to me. Ending our partnership means something to me. Not Clintock himself."

"Good," Perch said. "Because I had to kill him this afternoon."

The trailer creaked under the first drops of rain.

"He pointed a gun at me. I had to defend myself, so I used the base of a heavy lamp that was on his desk."

The *abuelo* felt muscles tighten at the corners of his jaw. "Didn't we agree that you weren't going to go there?"

Perch gestured for the *abuelo* to sit near the counter where he ate his meals. Then went to the back of the trailer and returned a moment later. He sat down across from the *abuelo*.

"Take a look at this." He held a heavy, stained shirt. "It's what happened to my clothes after I started in on him. Don't look at me like that, friend. I didn't have any choice. He drew a gun."

The *abuelo* felt sharp pains as though something with teeth were eating him from the inside out.

"You can be glad about one thing," Perch added. "I'm finally tying it all up like you've always wanted. I'm finally making this my last job."

The legs of his chair made a scraping sound when he pushed back

and stood up. The *abuelo* knew what was coming and that it was coming fast. There was a ballpeen hammer on the counter between them. He saw Perch reach for it and realized that it had been there for one simple reason, and that Perch had not even thought about the mess it would make inside his own trailer.

The *abuelo* felt very fortunate to grab hold of the hammer first.

**T**he holding cell of the county jail had no bars but was enclosed by hard glass walls from floor to ceiling. Reynolds had said nothing when he led Coffey inside. After the sheriff left, Coffey had the impression of being the only prisoner in the building.

Then Deputy Flores arrived, took him out of the cell, and sat with him at a desk. The station was empty. Flores reached into a paper bag and offered him a cheeseburger.

"Don't take it personally," the deputy said. "Jack's just upset. He hasn't had to deal with this kind of trouble in a long time."

"He didn't fill me in on the details."

"Someone murdered John Clintock around three this afternoon. Now it's dinnertime, and Jack's in a panic. It looks like no one saw anything at Clintock's. Either that or everyone out there hates him too much to say. Hates Clintock, I mean. But Jack's taking your story about wolf hunters a lot more seriously."

"He knows I didn't kill anyone?"

Flores nodded. "He just wanted

you out of the picture for awhile. You're not really under arrest."

"This is a real professional show you guys run here." Coffey reached for a cheeseburger.

Flores turned a computer monitor on the desk so they could both see it.

"I want you to look at some pictures," he said. "All the people with arrest records in the four surrounding counties are logged into this database—not just their mug shots and their names, but their height, weight, eye color, age, employment, religious and political affiliations. It gets pretty detailed."

More information was listed on the screen. Any piece of it could be used to call up names and photos of all people who met a particular search criterion.

"I started playing with it based on this photo that was logged into evidence when Jack brought you in," Flores said. He held up the picture of the two men taken by Carl from a distance. "These are what came up for the first guy—the taller one."

Coffey leaned toward the screen, holding his burger with a napkin.

"None of these guys look familiar—not that it means much," he said, watching mug shots appear on the screen. "Katie Cleary told me the guy looked like someone who might have worked on John Clintock's ranch, but she wasn't sure."

Flores turned in his chair. "Katie Cleary."

"You know her?"

"Decent single women are so rare around here they're kind of like celebrities. We went to school to-

gether. If I weren't married, I'd make her a priority. Did she tell you she's taking classes to be a teacher? Not many people know that."

"I didn't."

"See?"

"Edgar, why the buddy routine? A day ago your boss was ready to swing that steel baton of his into my head."

Flores looked at him. "And you baited him just right for that, didn't you? It was a good play for my sympathy. But Jack's not such a bad guy. You just have to know him."

"I'm sure he's loads of fun."

Flores turned back to the computer screen. Another page of photos came up. "Remember, these are only those who have arrest records. Anything?"

Coffey shook his head.

"Let's try the other guy," Flores said.

"About Katie."

"Yeah?"

"What happened to the husband?"

"So you're interested. I guess it didn't work out."

"That's your answer?"

"I've been married five years, Coffey. A few days out of every year, it feels like the greatest thing on earth. Other days it's all right, and a lot of the time I don't know what the hell I was thinking. If it was a few more days of one and not the other, I'd be in the same boat as her. Who can't relate to that?"

I can't, Coffey thought.

More photos on the screen. More faces. "There." Coffey didn't need a second look. What stopped him was the name.

It was the same one that topped the list he'd gotten from Bill Cleary—the one written with a partial address. But that one differed from the address listed by the computer.

"This says he lives here in town," Flores said. "Two prior arrests. Both assault and battery, both charges dropped. Neither victim willing to press charges."

Coffey felt his heart working like a triphammer. He crumpled the paper from his cheeseburger.

"Edgar, am I free to go?"

"Yeah, but I know what you're thinking and you can put it out of your mind. I want you to stay clear of this address. I'm going to check it myself."

All right, Coffey thought. You check that one. I'll check the other.

**T**he bartender in Nogales, Mexico, had often wondered if people would come looking for Max Perch. One day, he thought, it will be someone official. In uniform, with a gun and handcuffs. But certainly, it would not be a man in a faded T-shirt and jeans, a man with a green and yellow bruise on his jaw and a tan like a fieldworker. Then again, one could never tell with Perch. He would be the type to cross all kinds.

I have these directions, said the man in the T-shirt. But they aren't complete. Do you know who Max Perch is?

The bartender had wondered whether he would answer this question.

Perch was no demon. He was a man, as fragile as any other—in

the end. But if he were to come for retribution . . .

There had been an incident, years ago, when an American tourist was drunk in the bar. A college student perhaps, with the sleeves cut from his shirt and an upper body developed by weightlifting. The worst part came after Perch had tripped him and locked an arm around the boy's neck. It was then that he had gone to work on the boy's eye, pressing his thumb into the hard jelly until screams had filled the parking lot.

The bartender did not intend a similar fate for himself.

You know what kind of a man this is? the bartender said.

I do, said the man in the T-shirt, whose muscles looked like thin, flexing ropes. He murdered a friend of mine.

A dirt road, off highway 286. It was not in Mexico, but it was just north of the border. Coffey was losing the benefit of daylight, as the sun had gone down and darkness was collecting like mist. The clouds were releasing slow, fat drops of rain, not enough to call for windshield wipers. But there was thunder in the sky and a subliminal hum of electricity that reminded him of his arrival in town.

How long had it been—two days? Three? The sequence of events that brought him to this slow, careful drive at the bartender's instruction had erupted so quickly there hadn't been time for reflection.

But he knew the same mix of chance and circumstance that had created the situation now worked

for him as much as it worked against him. If Perch had killed Clintock, after killing Carl, then his actions were accelerating beyond control. He might have been lucky to leave the rancher's place without being seen. He might have been lucky in recovering other incriminating photos from Carl's desk. But that kind of luck was bound to fail sooner or later.

Wasn't it?

Coffey wondered when he saw the trailer at a distance, a ghost presence in final twilight. He saw litter in the dirt and an older model pickup parked to the side. He stopped his own truck and walked, taking a tire iron from beneath the seat. Approaching on foot was quieter than driving. But he would be visible if Perch happened to look out a window. Of course Perch would own a gun. That meant Coffey was relying on semidarkness and the fact that he wouldn't be expected.

He stopped near the old pickup. No light inside the trailer. But the truck was there. So maybe he's out for a walk, Coffey thought. Or maybe he's up on that hill, training a rifle on my spine.

He knew he should have developed a plan rather than relying on reflexes and momentum. Now there was evidence that this was where the man lived; the bartender had confirmed that, and Coffey could see it for himself. He should turn around and call Edgar Flores. See if Flores could get a warrant.

He had decided to do that when he turned for another look at the trailer, noticing its rust-smear-

entry door. The door was open. Not wide. But enough to move when a breeze swept by.

Coffey went forward, feeling awkward with the tire iron but holding it tightly.

There was blood on the floor. That's what he noticed first—a darkening stain absorbed by threadbare carpet. Then he saw his duffel bag, still heavy with the money he'd brought from Florida, sitting in a corner. He reached for it and found it had not been touched by the blood.

Then he saw Max Perch.

His face was down, nose to the carpet, and the hair above his left ear was crusted where he had been struck by whatever object had broken the side of his skull.

Coffey stepped away, let the rain strike his face outside the trailer, and drove off quickly. He stopped again at the bar in Nogales, told the bartender he had nothing more to fear from Señor Perch, and ordered a drink.

Then he put in a call to Edgar Flores and sat back to concentrate. Perch was out of the picture, he thought. But his partner wasn't.

A light was on when he arrived at Katie Cleary's house. After no one answered the door, he circled to the porch around back. In the darkness he could see Bill Cleary motionless on a recliner.

Coffey tapped at the screen, and Katie's father stood quickly. He had not been asleep. "Is that Don Coffey?" He squinted. "What time is it? Katie's still at work. I've got to make sure her boys are in bed."

"I thought we could talk first."

"What's wrong?"

Rain was still falling lightly.

"I don't know," Coffey said. "But the man who attacked me at Carl's house is dead. His name was Max Perch. Does that sound familiar?"

Cleary spread his hands. "I guess so."

"He was the first name you wrote for me on that list."

"So he was the guy? And you found him dead?"

Coffey nodded slowly. "What I'm thinking is that his partner killed him. I don't know who else it could have been. It must have been over money, since I found a duffel bag stuffed full of it at Perch's place. I'm thinking Perch's partner might have been so shaken up he forgot to take that money. Either that or he wanted me to find it so I'd have one less reason to come after him."

"Have you called the police?"

"I called Deputy Flores. In fact, after he checks out the murder scene, he's going to call me here."

Katie's father stepped closer to the porch screen. "Why is that?"

Coffey felt his throat working. "I told him to do it because you said you were an administrator for Fish and Wildlife, Bill. Flores doesn't know this yet, but it really bothers me. Honestly, you don't look like you were ever an administrator. Not in this life."

"I don't know what to say."

Coffey nodded. "I'm basing the rest of this on the way your hands shook when you first held the surveillance photo taken by Carl. And I'm basing it on the way you wrote Perch's name at the top of my list

with partial directions—steering me toward him in a way that wasn't meant to seem obvious. You wanted him off your back, so you wanted him caught."

"I still don't know what—"

"Carl never considered his own photo carefully enough. Or maybe he didn't want to. But he would have suspected you sooner or later."

They were facing each other, both standing.

"Maybe you could tell me that if we looked around your house, we wouldn't find the clothes that match those of the second man in the photo. Maybe you could tell me that the clothes you wore to Max Perch's place aren't stained with blood. And maybe you could tell me that you were forced into all of this, because I'd still like to believe you're a good man."

For a moment Cleary's mouth moved without making any sound.

"You don't have any evidence," he said.

"Now you're sounding defensive. And that concerns me, too."

Rain struck the roof of the porch. Nearly half a minute passed. Then a phone rang inside the house.

"That's Flores," Coffey said. "How much I tell him about your involvement depends on how much you tell me."

"Don, you've got this wrong."

The phone rang again.

"All right." Coffey looked down. "Just tell me again that you were only an administrator. Then tell me your conscience isn't eating up your insides, and I'll leave. Really, I will."

The rain intensified above the porch, making a noise like tiny sol-

diers marching across a thin sheet of metal. Coffey peered more closely into the darkness and saw that Bill Cleary's jaw was trembling. The older man pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head slowly.

"Katie knows," he said.

The rain got louder.

"What did you say?"

"She confronted me after you showed her that photograph. She's got a strange intuition about things. She could tell it was me when not even Carl could tell. I told her most of it, about Perch and the way he pressured me. She doesn't know what happened between Max and me this evening. But she knows the rest of it."

The phone rang again.

Cleary stepped forward. "Now it's not so simple, is it?"

Coffey felt his pulse skipping in his throat. He remembered the way she had hesitated over the photo and how she had later looked out a window and lied to him about it. It seemed such a halfhearted lie that he was surprised he'd believed it.

The phone rang again.

"My daughter's putting her life back together," Cleary said. "She needs me to look after her boys while she works. Can you understand that? Max Perch was a bad man. I took this job with him because I thought it would mean extra money so Katie could pay for school. You've got to know that I never meant for it to turn out like this."

He went into the house. For a moment Coffey stood in the rain, tasting the drops on his lips. Then Katie's father came back to the

porch and turned on a light. His eyes were red, and he held a cordless phone. "Deputy Flores would like to speak to you."

Coffey took the receiver.

"Edgar, I know I told you to call me here, but—"

"Forget it, Coffey. Whatever's on your mind, we've got other things to discuss."

"What are you—"

"I'm talking about this murder you reported at Max Perch's trailer. I'm at the trailer now, and there's blood everywhere just like you said. But there's just one thing wrong. I don't see a body, amigo."

**K**atie Cleary usually took her break alone. She made a point of it tonight, stepping behind the restaurant and standing in darkness. The day's sunshine had been absorbed by the asphalt and was emanating from the parking lot, reminding her of childhood and a few magical summers back east. But it was also raining, and the small, piercing drops were beginning to strike her skin like tiny little pins. Just as well.

Another waitress appeared and told her she had a visitor. Someone inside.

She didn't want it to be Don Coffey. She told herself that but was conscious of her disappointment when she saw from the frown of the other waitress that it couldn't possibly be him. So Katie went back through the loading dock, past the dishwashers, and into the dining room. Then she understood.

The man wore a dark shirt that



was stained and filthy. His hair was receding but still curled in clumps around his ears. On one side the hair above the ear was thick and matted. He wore snakeskin boots and rocked on his heels.

She backed into the kitchen. There were two phones in the restaurant, both in view of where the man was standing. She had never met him before, her father had seen to that. But she knew him by description and felt sick when she thought of what he had done to Carl.

Another waitress swept past, brushing her shoulder. A busboy with a crush on her looked away. Someone dropped a plate. One of the cooks winked and called her name sharply.

Through a window in the kitchen door she saw Perch's head turn slowly.

Easy, she thought. Take it easy.

But her pulse was accelerating. She didn't want to ask for help in the restaurant; it would be too much to explain, now or later. Did she even need help? She wasn't sure.

But she did know there were other telephones, back in the lobby of the hotel. Just across the parking lot, she told herself. Just a quick walk across the parking lot.

When Don Coffey ended his conversation with Edgar Flores, his hands turned cold. The nerves were singing along his spine. And Bill Cleary was nowhere in sight. Coffey found him in the driveway next to his truck, loading shells into a semiautomatic shotgun.

"I hit him with the flat side of

the hammer," Cleary said, eyebrows flat and eyes no longer red. "I won't make a mistake like that again."

"You're not—"

"Don, we've got to hurry. I know him. He'll go after Katie."

She had covered a third of the parking lot when she began to hear his boots, landing heavily on the ground. It was slippery in the rain, and the asphalt smelled like steam and tar. She didn't want to look back. If she looked back, it became real. She could feel blood rising in her throat, her tennis shoes biting at the ground as she began to run. Where was he now?

She had to look back. A glance, over the shoulder. Enough to see him recede against the backdrop of the restaurant. She felt her breath catch up to her as she slowed to a brisk walk. The hotel was a hundred yards away, and Max Perch was nowhere in sight. A part of her wanted to laugh hysterically. But she kept striding through the parking lot, into and out of the reach of lights that were spaced farther apart than they should have been.

She heard an engine when she was forty yards from the entrance to the hotel. But that was fine. Engines were fine. It was only the sound of heavy boots she had to worry about.

The lobby looked deserted from a distance. But there had to be people inside. And there had to be phones and security guards and places to hide, she told herself. There had to be someone who could help.

She was twenty yards away—

fifteen—when the truck swerved so close that she had to jump back to avoid it. For a moment she hoped it was her father or Don Coffey. But she knew better. After jumping back, she tripped foolishly and saw the shape of him above her, blocking out all light.

The tires of Coffey's truck made a sharp noise when they nicked the curb on the turn into the restaurant. Katie's father kept the shotgun low, barrel to the floor, while he leaned out the window for a better look.

"I want to go into the restaurant and get her," he said.

"Hold on. Let's make sure Perch isn't here." Coffey drove around the restaurant, then circled back toward the hotel. Katie's father saw the crookedly parked truck from forty yards away.

"That's him. That's got to be him."

Coffey accelerated sharply, then stood on the brakes. Bill Cleary was out the door before they came to a stop. He ran toward the closest end of the hotel, went around a corner, and vanished into darkness.

Coffey got out and stood in the rain, unsure of what had drawn Cleary around the corner.

He tried to slow his breathing so he could hear. Too late he remembered the tire iron in the truck. And the police. Why hadn't he thought to ask Edgar for backup?

Then he heard a sound, a choked, broken sound, and got around the corner quickly. The sound had come from Bill Cleary. Coffey saw why. The struggle between Katie and Max Perch had extended onto the

old ballfield next to the hotel. Katie fought viciously, using elbows, knees, and teeth whenever Perch got close. If he got a hand on her, she broke free. But she was tiring. Perch covered less distance to catch her each time she escaped, and the sequence was repeating so quickly Cleary had no sure way of stopping it. He was clutching the shotgun, crouched near the backstop, and his hands were shaking. Katie and Max Perch were too close together.

Coffey closed on them with wide strides, blood filling the muscles of his thighs. He pictured Cleary's finger on the trigger and realized he was going to join Perch and Katie in the shotgun's line of fire.

He was almost there when Perch reached Katie again, this time pressing his fingers into the side of her neck. In a flash of lightning Coffey saw the indentations his fingertips made along her throat. Then he saw her resistance collapse and the fingertips go even deeper until dark ridges of blood appeared on the nails. Katie fell with her eyes closed.

The shotgun roared. It sounded so close that Coffey thought he'd been hit until he saw Max Perch lifted magically off the ground, the blood appearing like red flower petals across his chest.

Then there was a ringing silence, with lightning threading the sky and rain making slick mud on the ground.

The passage of time was lost in a dream, and even though he tried hard to manage the watery visions that drifted across the backs

of his eyelids, he could only be pulled by currents, beginning with an image of the young doctor with the tired eyes speaking quietly of Katie.

"Nerves energize vocal cords," he said, aligning the tips of his fingers with his throat. "When those nerves are damaged . . ."

There are questions, said Jack Reynolds. There are questions and spinning blue lights, sweeping in circular motion, drifting across the mud of an old ballfield and casting their glow into an air-conditioned room in the sheriff's office just down the hall from the glass-enclosed cells . . .

He woke to find himself parked at the side of the road where Carl had parked for the last time, near John Clintock's property. It was early evening again, this time with no hint of rain. The sky was watercolor orange. He stepped out of his truck, rotating his neck from side to side, waiting for the traces of his dream to subside. Three weeks had passed. The job with Wolin was still waiting in San Diego.

He heard Katie Cleary's footsteps on the loose gravel and turned to watch her approach. She'd walked out to the place where Carl had seen the wolf—had asked Coffey if they could find the place where it happened, based on maps and what the sheriff had told them.

"Was there anything to see?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Just this."

The sweep of the landscape extended to the horizon. She motioned with her hand and turned away. He had to concentrate to hear her. The doctor had said her voice

would be deeper now, roughened and coarse unless she whispered.

"You fell asleep?" she said.

He leaned in to hear the question and nodded. "I guess I'm still catching up. You know, we took a chance by coming out here. It's still private property."

"Well," she nodded. "Thank you."

She had been distant and formal since she'd been well enough to speak again.

"You said something to me awhile ago," he offered, leaning against the side of his truck. "You said that when I found out my friend was doing something wrong I should have just come out with it and let other people sort out the consequences."

A car swept past, bringing a rush of wind that lifted her hair.

She looked away. "Do you really think it's possible to separate things like that?" she said. "I've been wondering if you would try to push me this way—to get me to say things that put my father in prison—just because you want to correct a mistake in your past."

"Is that why you think I'm doing it?"

"I don't know. But I don't know what purpose it serves, either. It doesn't bring Carl back. It doesn't fix anything that's already been done. It just hurts things. It hurts my dad, it hurts the kids. It hurts me."

Coffey looked east, where the sky was already darkening. "I'm just trying to think about it clearly," he said. "Is your father the kind of person who can live with something like this? Is he the kind of person who can just forget it? Are you?"

She said nothing.

"Katie, I'm not saying he should plead guilty as an accomplice or anything else. I'm just saying he should have the lawyers put it all on the table. It's too much for him to carry around—for anybody to carry around."

For a moment her eyes came back to his, their movements as digital and precise as ever. Then she kicked at the ground. "I never thought so many things would happen," she said. "I never thought I would have so much history, and I never wanted to live as if so many things had marked me on the inside."

"Me neither."

"Oh, do tell."

He could see by the tensing of her throat that she regretted the sarcasm as soon as she'd used it.

"Listen," he said. "That bag of money was finally exchanged for a cashier's check like it should have been a long time ago. It was Carl's, but most of it is going to be divided between us. We're both in his will. But I've also got a life waiting in California. To be honest, I'm not so

eager to get to it any more. In fact, I'm looking for reasons not to go. And I'm really hoping you'll give me some, Katie."

Her eyebrows lifted.

"That's a start," he said. "Now, how about talking to your father again?"

She met his eyes full on, then looked far away. The colors of the sky were reflected on her face, and for a moment she could not hide the fact that she was still young. Still blessed with vigor.

"Maybe," she finally said. And in some way he could see that she was smiling although the corners of her mouth had not moved. "But we'll have to go slowly."

"As slowly as you like."

They stood against the truck for a moment, letting the darkness gather around them, until they heard a gust of wind that whistled from a distance, barely audible as it swept through a canyon.

Katie nodded and took his hand quietly, as if they were in the presence of ghosts.

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# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the November issue.*

Static tended to garble the woman's high-pitched, frantic voice coming over his radio: "... murd ... please ... quick ..."

"Where are you?" Sheriff Sherman spoke loudly into his microphone.

"What ... say?" she asked.

"Where—are—you?" he repeated slowly.

"Clef Island." The static suddenly cleared. "Oh, sheriff, we are desperate. One of us just killed another. Do hurry!" The radio went dead.

Efforts to raise Clef Island on his police band proved fruitless. All Sheriff Sherman knew about the isolated island was that it had recently been purchased by a group of retired musicians, who had renamed it. Local gossip had it that they were eccentric. He checked the fuel in his motor launch and set out on the choppy sea for the island.

As he approached it, the sheriff could see, perched on the cliff overlooking Arpeggio Bay, seven brightly painted houses in a row from north to south. Each was a different color; the brightest was orange.

He climbed the cliff of Clef. Five anxious oldsters awaited him.

"Now," he said, "what's this about murder? Who killed whom?"

"We know, but we'd rather not say directly," replied one woman, evidently the group's spokesperson. "After all, the killer is probably listening to everything we say. Frankly, we are fearful for our lives." The other four nodded agreement. "So," she continued, "we decided to put the case in your hands, trusting that an intelligent young man like you will solve it. You see, we seven purchased this island for a retirement village: three men—Bart, Dan, and Fred—and four ladies—Alice, Cora, Ellen, and myself. I'm Gina, the one who radioed for assistance. We named our new place Clef Island because we are all musicians. Our tiny village we call Rustic-Ann, since it's rather rustic and was formerly Ann's Island." She gave a nervous little giggle. "Some of our old friends think we named it Rusty Can, but that's definitely wrong."

One of the men stepped forward, leaning on his cane. "We were such a congenial group, sheriff, that it's difficult to fathom such a tragedy. We even had a little orchestra—just to keep our hand in, so to speak. Each played a different instrument; one played the organ."

"I might also mention," said Gina, "that we each brought a different pet with us to the island. One brought a hamster."

"Our last names," added the aged gentleman with the cane, "are Jarvis, Katz, Lagler, McNutt, Newman, O'Hara, and Parker."

"Who lives where?" asked the sheriff, trying to understand the layout.

(1) An old man who identified himself as Dan answered. "Four of us are in sequence from north to south: myself, McNutt, the dog owner, and the person in the yellow house."

(2) Fred was next. "That's right. Another sequence from north to south includes myself, the owner of the goose, Mr. O'Hara, and the guitarist."

(3) Alice, with white hair and a puckish face, declared, "Another sequence of houses in the same direction is this: the cat owner, myself, the person in the blue house, and the cellist."

(4) Gina said, "Speaking of sequences, sir, the piano player lives just south of the anteater's owner and just north of me. The man in the white house is south of all of us."

(5) Mr. Parker waved his cane toward the row of houses. "As you can see, sheriff," he said, "that red house yonder is just south of the harp player and just north of my abode. Ellen lives north of all three."

(6) The person surnamed Newman stepped forward. "Neither the resident of the green house nor I keep the fox as a pet. The owner of the badger lives just south of me and just north of the green house."

(7) Ellen added, "Bert, Dan, and I include the person surnamed Lagler, the musician in the brown house, and the saxophone player."

(8) Mr. Katz cleared his throat. "Three of us live in adjacent houses that are brown, red, and blue. I live in one, and the flute player lives in another." His eyes grew misty. "The poor, unfortunate lady," he lamented, "departing this world without her beloved pet hamster. It was a perfectly horrible way to go—beaten to death in her own home with a saxophone wielded by its insane owner."

All at once it dawned on the sheriff that these people were pretty clever. Without naming killer or victim, they'd revealed the identities of both. *Who was killed? Where? Who was the murderous saxophone player?*

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See page 62 for the solution to the September puzzle.

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Can you use help working these puzzles?

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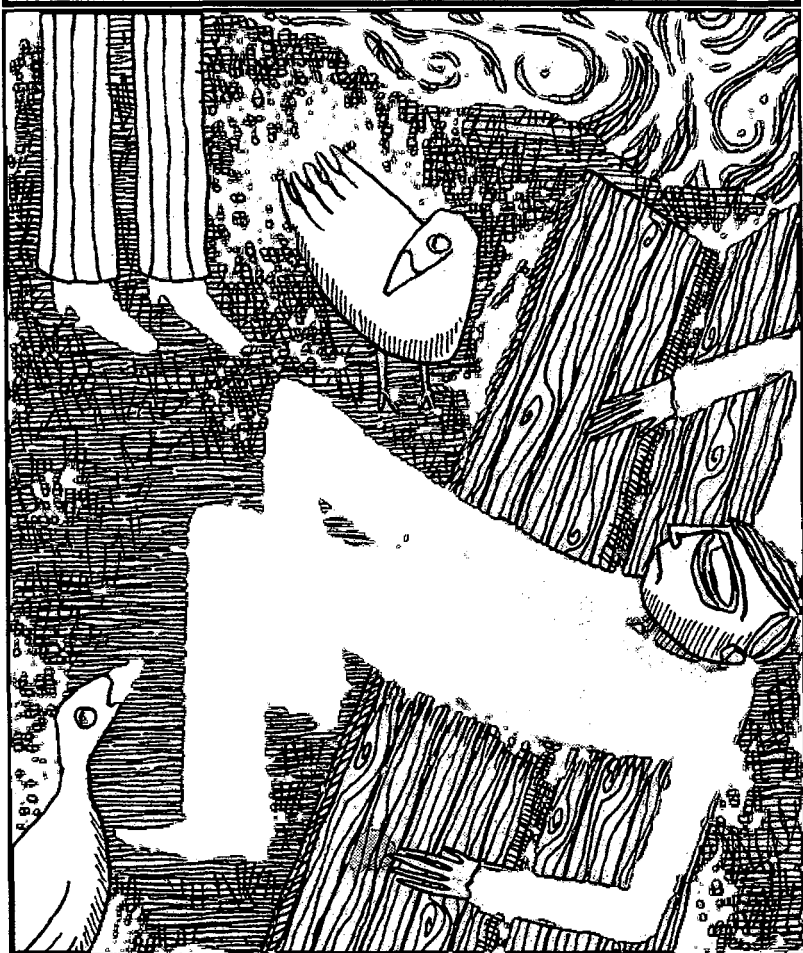
"UNSOLVED"

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE  
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# DO DUCKS KNOW IT'S SATURDAY?

H. R. F. Keating





**T**he young man on the greasy wooden bench, some would have called him a boy with his long white face marked by a flaming pimple on his left cheekbone and another coming out just below it, looked up with a dart of anxiety. But when he took in the figure who had come walking round the bend of the canal, he did no more than give him one casual sneering glance before flopping back into his previous semi-slumped state. The person toddling along the towpath towards him was a little elderly man, white hair lifted up in the early morning breeze, white mustache, stub of white beard. Portly and pipesmoking, he exuded an air of cheerful friendliness.

Within talking distance he came to a halt, removed the pipe from his mouth, and shot out a question.

"Do ducks know it's Saturday?"

"Uh?"

The boy looked up, his narrow face downdrawn with mystified aggressiveness.

"Well, I'll tell you what it is," the old chap went blithely on. "I don't know if you often come along the canal as early as this?"

The boy's eyes took on a sudden wariness, and he gave a quick, involuntary glance down to a shapeless dull orange bundle tucked away under the bench.

"No? Well, you see, I do come here. I walk along this way every blessed morning of my life. Except Sundays. Sundays I have my lie-in. But every other morning it's out of the house on the stroke of seven. I live just up there on the opposite side from the electronics factory behind you, where they make something they call *advanced*, whatever that is. Off I go every morning, down the street as far as the gate onto the canal. Then it's back along the towpath till I get to a little alleyway just along there going up to the street again, and it's home to breakfast."

The boy turned a little and looked up at the big factory building, a single set of iron doors breaking its solid back wall.

"Okay, Granddad," he said, "you've had your little walk. So why don't you just go and get your bleeding breakfast?"

"Ah," said the old man, not at all put out by the boy's incivility, "but I haven't told you yet about the ducks. You see, every weekday morning when I come along, they're there down in the water paddling away. And you can see why. A lot of the factory girls go this way, chattering along the towpath as far as the alley, to get to work making those special computers or whatever it is they do in there. So the ducks have learnt, weekdays they can't have a quiet sleep up on the bank. But Saturdays . . . Saturdays are different. That factory is smart, latest thing, and a five-day-week place. So when I come along of a Saturday, there aren't any chatterbox girls. And the ducks are sitting all in a row on the edge of the path, heads tucked under their wings enjoying a nice old zizz."

The boy was looking increasingly irritated at this spate of talk.



"So," the old man concluded, "that's the question: how do ducks know it's Saturday?"

The boy half rose from the bench, shooting quick glances to left and right. "Look," he said, his voice high and croaking, "I told you once, didn't I? Why don't you just get off back home?"

"All right, sonny. All right. I'm off. Got to be. My old dear'll be brewing the tea in a couple of minutes. But all the same, you think about it. Just look at all those ducks perched on the edge farther along. When I come by, of course, like as not they'll all go diving into the water. But how did they know today's Saturday?"

Pipe back in mouth. Toddle, toddle, toddle, some fifty yards more. To disappear round the next bend as the ducks, as predicted, plopped one after another into the canal.

The boy watched him go and then took from the pocket of his jeans a watch with only half its strap. He peered at it, gave a long look to his right and another to his left. Not a sign of anyone else about at this early time of day. Quickly he heaved himself up on to the bench, and standing at full stretch and looking back towards the blank brick bulk of the factory, he gave one decisive sweep of his right arm back and forth.

At once, with a grinding squeal, the iron doors in the middle of the factory's wall were pushed open, and two heavysset men came staggering out carrying between them a large, square, grey-painted box. They scrambled down the weedgrown bank till they reached the rusted iron railing of the towpath.

"For Christ' sake, give us a hand, lad," snapped the bigger of the two, a fat-bellied fellow, his bald head shiny with sweat.

"And why the hell's the boat not ready?" growled his partner, shorter, mean-eyed, black-bearded.

"I-I didn't get a chance to blow it up," the boy answered as he took the weight of the grey box while it was balanced on the rusty spikes of the railing. "Some old geezer came along, wouldn't push off."

"He hasn't seen us?" Baldhead asked sharply. "Christ, if the cops show him our photos . . ."

"No, no. He went off. He was well round the corner before I gave the all-clear."

"Thank God for that."

The two of them scrambled over the railing then and maneuvered the heavy grey computer down to rest at last on the bench.

"The boat, the boat," Blackbeard snarled. "Don't bloody stand there, boy. Get it going. We aren't over there before some sodding police car spots the van waiting, we're done for."

But already the boy had hauled the dull orangey package out from under the bench and was kneeling, fitting a compressed-air cylinder to it.

The whole bundle began to writhe and spread as air squirted into its rubber sides, revealing itself before long as more of a raft than a boat.



But it was not quite blown up to its full extent when there came a voice, calling out. From twenty or thirty yards farther along.

"I've had an idea. Do you think ducks tell . . ."

His voice trailed away, and it was plain he had seen them, all three. Had seen the grey box. Had seen the rubber raft. And was slowly working out what must be happening.

"Get him," Baldhead snarled at the boy. "Get rid of him."

"Rid—rid of—you mean—but—"

The boy's white face had gone suddenly even whiter.

"Yes, you. You wanted to come in with us, didn't you? Well, do something for a change."

"But how? How can I—"

"Here, take this."

With a flick of his wrist Blackbeard unscrewed the cylinder from the now fully ready raft. He thrust it into the boy's hand.

"And do it quick. We won't wait."

"Yes. No. Jesus."

The boy turned and began to run stumblingly towards the staring figure of the old man, still transfixed to the spot, pipe jutting out from beneath his white mustache.

Back at the bench the two of them quickly slid the wide inflatable into the canal, then hurried over to the box and started to lift it.

At last the old man at the corner seemed to realize what the boy, stumbling taut-faced towards him, the heavy metal cylinder in his hand, must be intending. He turned and started to run, little legs working.

The two with the computer were finding it hard to get it onto the raft. Each time its weight descended, the little bobbing craft began to slide away across the dirty brown water.

Then from round the bend in the towpath there came a single cry and a heavy splash.

"Where's the damn kid?" Baldhead, straining to hold the weighty computer, demanded into the air. "If he can steady the bloody boat—"

"I done it."

The boy came up, shaking and panting.

"Then get a grip on this damn thing, Christ' sake."

The boy flung the cylinder he had not ceased to clutch into the canal, dropped to his knees, managed just to get hold of one of the raft's rubber-ring sides, hauled it close to the bank.

"Slowly . . . careful . . . keep hold, for God's sake . . ."

At last it was done. The stolen computer made a deep trough in the flat center of the raft but no worse.

Blackbeard slid in down beside it. Baldhead was quick to join him, nearly tipping over the wide, unsteady craft as he settled beside the big grey box.



"Me, me," the boy screamed. "I got to get away."

They would probably have abandoned him, but a puff of breeze wafted the crazy craft right up against the bank once more and he was able to slide down into the small remaining space.

At once they all three dipped their outstretched hands in the water and began for all they were worth to swish the raft across the width of the canal.

But they were less than halfway when a familiar voice came clearly down towards them.

"Stop, thieves. Stop, thieves."

They ceased their paddling. They turned to look.

The old fellow was bouncily swimming there at the canal bend, driving in front of him a whole agitated fleet of brown ducks and bright-colored drakes.

"You said you had . . ." Baldhead turned fiercely on the boy. "You stupid little sod."

"I—I—he sort of dodged. But I pushed him in. How was I to know he could swim? I can't."

"Who the hell can? But we'll have to finish him now. Come on."

With much splashing and more cursing they contrived to get their unwieldy craft to turn, and then, all three paddling desperately, they began sailing up towards the old man, who had apparently got it into his head that it was enough to call out *Stop, thieves* to scare anyone into flight, policemen miraculously appearing, handcuffs at the ready.

But between the furious paddlers and their innocent target there were the ducks. Saturday calm totally disrupted. Disturbed, enraged. And it was the first of the drakes that did it. A furious, lucky peck at the nearest side of the overloaded raft. The hiss of fast-escaping air.

Sunk with all hands.

"Well," said the old fellow swimming away, white-tufted chin bravely above the dirty canal water. "Ducks do know something, that's for sure."

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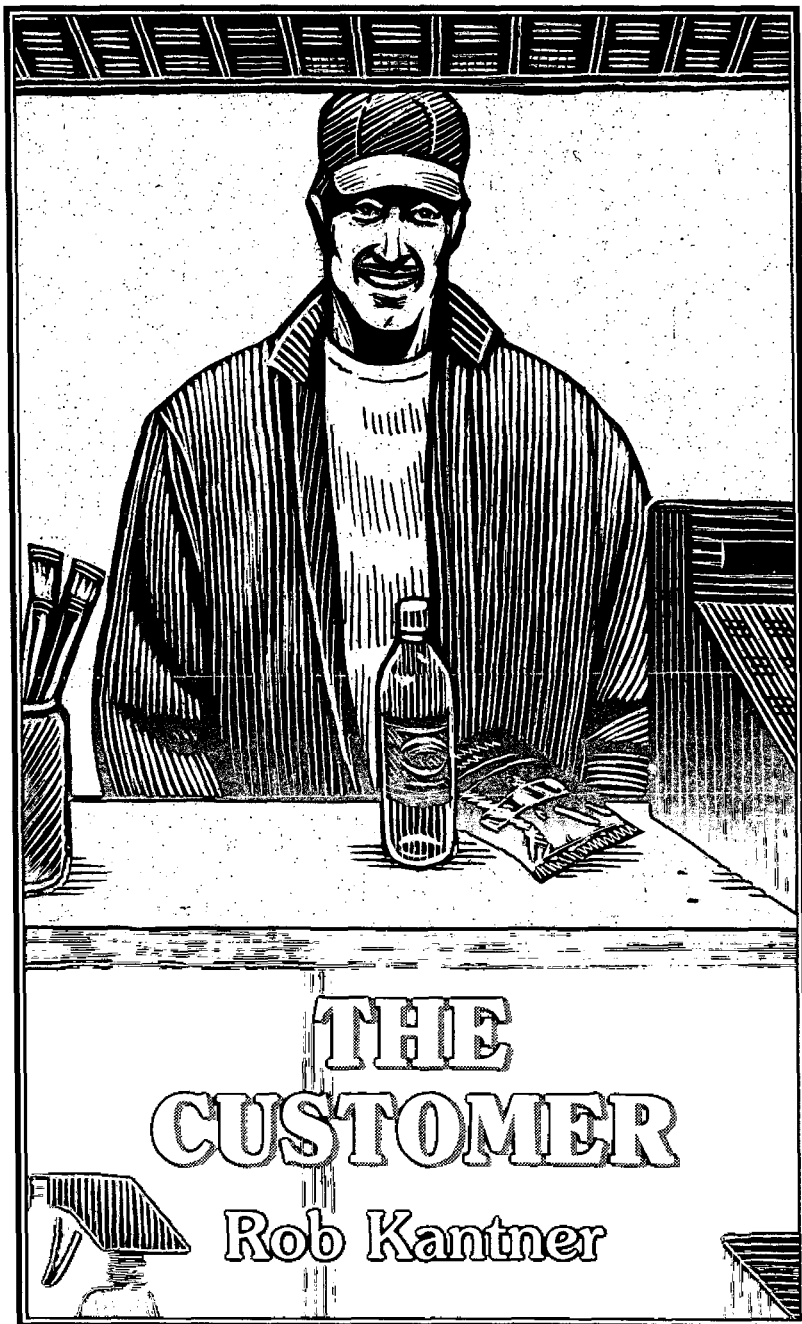


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**A**fter what Tim did to the little old lady, Colleen knew tonight would be no ordinary night.

Tonight there would be real trouble.

This happened at eleven o'clock, just an hour into Colleen's shift. As usual, it was just the two of them: Tim, the "manager," worked the register; Colleen, whom Tim called the "grunt," doing the scut work. For a Wednesday night, the Pit 'n' Git was busy. A steady stream of cars, sport utility vehicles, vans, and long-haul trucks pulled up to the pumps to load up on gas and diesel. The vehicles disgorged lone truckers, young couples, and families with kids. The front door did its annoying *ding-ding-ding* as the people poured into the store. They bought chips and pop and beer, paid for their gas, sometimes asked for directions, and used the restroom. They left behind trash, currency, and plumes of exhaust in the night air.

"Marks" was Tim's term for them. Just a bunch of freakin' marks. Except the locals, of course. These Tim referred to by name, and treated with cautious and attentive respect. But the rest were long distance commuters, many on their way to the beach/golf/casino region several states to the south. These commuters were almost always in a hurry and not likely to make a fuss.

Tim knew that. He had an eerie ability to read them, size them up, know with catlike quickness just how far he could push them, what he could get away with.

Even before the old lady, he had warmed up with a few minor pranks. Colleen, while replenishing the Jolt cola in the cooler, had heard a man ask Tim for directions to Taylor. Tim had obliged, using that unctuous pseudo-helpful voice that made Colleen feel ill. But his directions, she knew full well, led to a county road that ended abruptly at a wasteland known thereabouts as The End of the World.

Nasty. But, for Tim, small potatoes.

A while later Colleen emerged from the restroom to see Tim wave a five dollar bill in the air, a smug grin splitting his freckled face. Meaning he had just shortchanged a customer, something at which he was uncommonly skilled.

Six hours to go, Colleen thought. How will I get through this?

There was a lull in the traffic just then. Beckoning her over, Tim lighted a cigarette. He looked paler than usual tonight, short hair a reddish bristle, inky black eagle with its USN fairly jumping off the white skin of his bare forearm. "Something buggin' you, hon?" he asked her, pale eyes scanning her chest.

Folding her arms, Colleen struggled to keep her voice neutral.

"Somebody defaced the label on the baby-changing station in the bathroom."

Tim exhaled smoke through a toothy, knowing grin. "How 'bout that?"

"Blacked out the C," Colleen added.

Tim drew himself up. "Well, that's just out-freakin'-rageous," he said. "I think you ought to call in a SWAT

team is what you should do." As if dispersing flies, he waved a freckled hand at her just as the door went *ding-ding-ding*. "Turn to, now. Get back there and swab out that cooler like I told you to, how 'bout that."

Which was when the old lady came in.

Colleen walked over to the stockroom, sat just inside the open door, and opened a soda. She was two hours into her shift and had earned a break, Tim's command notwithstanding. He stood behind the sales counter, with its cash register and standup racks of maps and chips and chewing gum, as the old lady came toward him. She had short gray hair and thick glasses and loose, comfortable, gaily colored clothes. Walking in a hunched shuffle, she extended a bill to Tim. "Ten dollars on pump three," she said.

Without a word Tim took the bill, punched the register, and put it away as the old lady shuffled out.

Colleen sipped her soda. It seemed to have no taste. She wanted a cigarette, but even though Tim smoked on the job—heck, he smoked *at the counter*—the one time she had lit up inside the building he had written her up. Next time she had stepped out on the sidewalk to smoke, and he had written her up for leaving her post. Two writeups in two days! Heck, at Axle she had only had one writeup in *eighteen months!*

Why does life have to be this way? she wondered. Why did everything have to go so sour? How in the world did I end up here? For years, she had been an ordinary person

living an ordinary life doing the ordinary things young women were supposed to do. Up until that awful night four years ago—she remembered it so well, the radio was playing "their" song, "Loving Every Minute of You"—when they got sideswiped on the bypass and had gone over the side, just where the guardrail ended. The tumble that followed seem endless, a jarring, bouncing, merciless careen, down and over and down some more, the whole world gone crashing and crushing and shattering, glass blasting everywhere, till everything went suddenly cricket-chirping still, all upside down. Though not wearing a seatbelt, Colleen had suffered only bumps and bruises and in fact crawled out of the wreck. Andy, on the other hand, stayed securely seatbelted inside the flattened car and, as frantic men and women pried and torched and sawed, slowly bled to death.

Two months later Ellen was born.

Now Colleen sat, feeling exposed, just inside the open stockroom door of the Pit 'n' Git as Tim's eyes flicked toward her seemingly every twelve seconds. She was not allowed to close the door; even on break she had to pay attention to the front so she could pitch in to help in case of a sudden rush. Those were the rules. She had learned the rules oh so well in the three weeks she had worked for Tim. Three endless weeks—

*Ding-ding-ding* as the old lady came back in.

"You set the pump wrong," she said to Tim as she shuffled toward the counter.

"What?" was Tim's scornful retort.

"I told you ten dollars," the old lady said. "You didn't set the pump right, and it ran over to ten eighty-five before I could stop it."

"You said fill it," Tim answered.

The old lady glowered. "I said ten dollars! I know what I said, young man! And I gave you a ten dollar bill!"

"You gave me ten," Tim said with oily, bored patience, "and you told me to fill it. It's not my fault you needed more gas than that. That'll be eighty-five cents."

The customer drew herself up. "Well, I won't pay it."

"You have to."

"I do not! It wasn't my fault!"

Tim smiled his big gap-toothed smile. "You have to pay it," he said, "or I'll call the cops. How 'bout that?"

Colleen stood and left the stockroom, headed for the counter, thoughts a blur.

"You can't do that," the old woman told Tim, voice quavering.

"Sure I'll report it," Tim said. "It's the rules, how 'bout that?" His pale eyes flashed at Colleen as she reached the counter. "What do *you* want? I told you to turn to."

Colleen smacked her palm on the counter and drew back, leaving three quarters and a dime shining on the Formica. "There," she said, and turned on her heel to head for the cooler.

"You don't have to do that, honey," came the old woman's voice.

"Just take it," Colleen muttered.

"Get back here," Tim commanded.

Ignoring them both, Colleen went to the cooler, grabbed the string mop, and started mopping the cooler floor, swinging the implement expertly with her strong arms. She knew she had not heard the last of this. There would be consequences. Even now she was sure Tim was out there figuring out what they would be. Whatever it was, it would not be good. This was just one more thing, one more push on the downward slope. Since the wreck, it seemed to her that her life had simply continued crashing, though in slower motion. She'd hooked up at Axle—a bearable if dismal job. But Axle had laid her off because of Japanese competition; at least that was the excuse. She then spent two desperate weeks job-hunting. That taught her just how faceless and expendable she was. No one knew her or cared to know her. No one cared about her bills, her virtually destitute mother, her barely functioning clunker, her hungry half-orphaned toddler at home. Few bothered to read the resumes she sent out, or responded to the voice mails she left. Even those who called her in for interviews seemed armored with a crust of indifference through which she could not break. The default decision was always *no*, it seemed to her, and interviews were aimed at validating that decision.

Then, in what seemed like a miracle, the Pit 'n' Git headhunter hired her—with a ninety-day trial period—and assigned her to this store way out on the highway. Tim's store. Lord, she thought Axle had been bad. Next to this, Axle had been *heaven*. She did not just

dislike this job; she *hated* this job. Well, that was not exactly right. The job could be okay. She liked the hours, the pay was decent, there were chances for advancement, she honestly enjoyed the customers. What she hated was *Tim*.

"I got you."

His voice made her jump. She whirled, almost losing the mop handle. Tim stood at the cooler door, a cigarette cupped in his palm. "What do you mean?" she asked, knowing the answer.

"What you did, that was insubordination," he said, savoring the word. "I write you up for that, and you're gone, honey, how 'bout that."

"I didn't—"

"Three writeups in your first ninety days," he overrode. "That's immediate termination. It's the rules."

Her hands felt slick on the mop handle.

"I didn't do anything wrong," she said softly, hating herself for sounding weak.

Tim looked at her, pale eyebrows scanning her up and down. "You know, you got a lot of pluses for such a fat girl," he said. "Marla was like you."

Mouth dry, Colleen swallowed. She wanted to leave, but he was blocking the cooler door.

"She got into trouble, too," he said casually. "Just couldn't follow the rules. But she learned how to take care of me. She got good at it, *real* good at it. And that made everything all right."

Colleen blinked rapidly. Though this was nothing new—it seemed to be a working woman's fate—her

reaction was an almost dizzying nausea.

Tim exhaled smoke. "So what I'm thinking is—"

"No," she heard herself say. He blinked. "No!" she said again, and there was strength in her voice. "No way in hell."

He laughed softly, pale eyes dancing, mouth a lipless hole. "It's fun when they fight," he said. "'Cause you know what, honey, we're taking the physical inventory next week, and it could be a bunch of stuff will turn up missing—"

Oh *no*. "You can't prove anything on me," she said, once again sounding weak, once again hating herself for it.

"—cops at your house," he was muttering on, eyes still dancing above that lipless grin. "Asking you all kinds of questions. Embarrass you in front of your mama. Prob'ly lock you up. Dress you in a orange jumpsuit and ankle bracelets and —"

*Ding-ding-ding.*

Annoyed, Tim glanced toward the front door. Dropping his smoke on the floor, he left it there to smolder at her feet and headed out toward the counter. As if in a trance, Colleen left the cooler, too, crushing out Tim's smoldering smoke as she went. The store seemed different now. Brighter. And the night outside seemed murkier and blacker. She realized it was getting into the wee hours now, the darkest hours of the night. Few customers would be stopping by. What would Tim do? How would he treat her? What should *she* do? She felt she could

not get a decent breath. She retreated to the stockroom. Got to think, got to think, got to *think*.

The customer was a tall man, very fit, wearing bluejeans, cowboy boots, a blue ballcap, and a light brown summer jacket. He put a sack of boiled peanuts and a bottle of spring water on the counter as Tim keyed the cash register and said, "Five ten."

The customer handed Tim a bill. Then Tim said, "How much gas you want?"

"None, thanks," the customer said.

"You're parked at the pumps."

"I know, I just parked there, but I don't need any gas, thanks."

"Can't park at the pumps unless you're buying gas. If you're not buying gas, you park in the parking lot. It's the rules." Colleen, in the stockroom, picked up her jacket and purse and thought wearily, oh Lord, here we go again.

The customer was taller than Tim. He had short curly gray hair and a pencil-thin mustache. From what Colleen could see of him, he looked youthful and handsome. He certainly had a nice smile, and he bestowed that smile on Tim. "Well, I'm sorry. I didn't know it was the rules."

"There's a sign out there," Tim told him, holding onto the twenty. "Says no parking at the pumps."

"I didn't see it. I'm sorry. It's dark out there, I'm in a rush—"

"There's plenty of lights," Tim said. "Sign's right there in plain sight, letters six inches high. English letters. You can read, can'tcha?"

Colleen, half listening, set her

jacket and purse down again. I can't surrender to him, she thought. But if I quit, if I leave, that's like surrendering, too.

"I can read," she heard the customer say agreeably.

"Then you shouldn'ta broke the rules, how 'bout that."

"Look, what's the big deal?" the customer asked quietly. "It's past midnight, there's nobody around, I'm not blocking anybody—"

"It's the rules, and rules is rules," Tim said. His voice did not rise, did not strengthen. And his expression did not change, the lipless smile, the pale eyes bright with enjoyment.

"I said I'm sorry," the customer said. "May I please have my change now?"

"Not till you move the car."

"Give me my change, please," the man said mildly, "and I'll not only move my car, I'll drive it away, and you'll never see it, or me, again."

Tim popped the register drawer out, put the twenty inside, and bumped the drawer shut with his belly. "Move the car, sir," he said, eyes dancing. "And then we'll take real good care of you. First things first, how 'bout that?"

The customer studied him impassively for a minute and then nodded. "Okay." He walked out of the store.

Tim, smiling cheerily behind the cash register, gave Colleen an inquiring look. Yes, she thought, I have to decide. I can't lose this job. *I can't lose this job*. But what choice did she have? She had mentioned the troubles to her mother. And got the usual platitudes. This too shall

pass. Ask and you shall receive. God helps those who help themselves. Pray to Him and your prayers will be answered. Colleen had tried that, to no avail, and told her mother so. Mom had just smiled—God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform. Colleen retorted that wonders were in short supply lately. Mom said God works His will gradually, in ways you least expect. Colleen wasn't sure that was entirely true. God had only needed a split-second to take Andy away from her.

No. She could not wait on God or on anyone else. She had to decide now, and she found she had decided. Her jacket and purse had gotten into her hands again, but she set them down once more. Tim may win in the end, she thought as she headed out toward the counter, but he won't win without a fight.

A gray Chevy Suburban pulled up to the curb. The customer got out and came in, making the door go *ding-ding-ding*. Colleen paused to wait as the customer went to the counter. Smiling, Tim rang the register, got out change, and stuffed it into the customer's hand.

"Thank you," the customer said, tucking the change into his jeans pocket.

Tim bagged the man's purchases and pushed the bag toward him. But the customer did not take the bag. Instead he gave Colleen a quick glance—what seemed to be a silent warning—as he reached inside his jacket. What he came out with was a very large bluish-black revolver. Pointing it at Tim, and face quite impassive, the customer

promptly shot Tim in the chest.

The report deafened Colleen and made bottles rattle in the cooler. Bug-eyed, she watched as Tim stutter-stepped backward and collided with the cigarette rack. Then, pale eyes saucerlike, Tim dropped like a stringless marionette out of her sight behind the counter. The customer glanced at Colleen, winked, then bent over the counter. "How 'bout that?" he said to Tim, and then fired again.

Colleen realized her hands were up, raised protectively between her and the customer, and she was backing away. A sound was trying to force its way past her locked-shut throat. Her mind was blank with fright. In slow motion the customer straightened and turned toward her. At the sight of her, his expression softened. With a flourish he put the revolver away under his jacket. Then he smiled, gave her a tip of his hat, picked up his bag, sauntered out, and drove away.

The detectives were a male-female team. The man was round and walruslike, right down to the mustache. The woman was older and grayer and jockey-thin. They introduced themselves to Colleen and took up positions on each side of her as she sat on her stool in the stockroom.

"So who did it?" the woman asked.

"Tell us what he looked like," the man said.

The numbness was wearing off. Colleen could hear the sounds of men and women working out there in the store: cameras flashing, voices murmuring, feet shuffling as the



uniformed officers poked around. Through the open door she could see snatches of what was going on. Out front a pair of squad cars flashed lights, warning customers away.

All this made sense of some sort. But her thoughts were an incoherent mush. She glanced at the detectives and said, "I—I don't know, I don't know."

"You know," the woman cop said dismissively. "Just tell us what happened."

"In your own words," the walrus said gently. "Take your time."

Beyond them, out in the store, Colleen could see some people in white, one at each end of a chrome dolly bearing something long and thin under a white sheet. As they wheeled it around and out the front door, Colleen felt a flash of nausea—and then another emotion, another one entirely, wholly unbidden.

Relief.

The silence was getting awkward. Colleen looked at walrus, the nicer one. "I'm just so upset," she said. "I can't hardly hitch words together."

"Tell us what you saw," he said.

"Just in your own words," the other cop said. "Come on, you saw it all, you remember everything."

Which was true. Colleen could picture the gunman as clear as day. The curly gray hair, the nice smile, the chin dimple. The jeans, cowboy boots, blue ballcap, light brown jacket. And of course the gray Chevy Suburban, a newer model, she thought, shiny and clean. What startled her was that she now remembered things she hadn't real-

ized she'd seen. His little pinky ring. The SEMPER FI sticker on the rear bumper of his Suburban. The cell phone clipped to his belt. The way the muzzle of his revolver had leaked smoke as he drew it back, flourished it, put it back in his shoulder holster. The click-click-click of the steel plates on his boot heels as he sauntered out.

Colleen remembered something else. The cautioning glance he gave her. The wink, and the way he tipped his cap to her. And she remembered the way Tim disappeared behind the counter—disappeared without wanting to, went away once and for all to someplace from which he could never scare her or hurt her ever again.

And she felt yet another emotion, also wholly unbidden.

Gratitude.

"Well," she began, "fact is," she went on, and licked her dry lips, "I didn't see him."

The cops were staring at her, stereo flat-eyes. "Why not," walrus said.

"I was in the bathroom."

"Bathroom," the other repeated.

"Somebody marked up the baby-changing station," Colleen said, words torrenting out. "I was trying to figure out how to clean it up."

"Yeah," the walrus grunted, glancing at his partner. "I was in there. Somebody blacked out the C on the label."

The other detective rolled her eyes.

"So you were in there," she said frostily. "What *did* you see?"

"Nothing," Colleen answered.

The detectives stared at her, looking patient, enduring.

"Okay," said walrus. "Start over. From the top. . . ."

" . . . Heard the shots," Colleen said.

"Heard them?" the woman asked. "Or saw them?"

"Heard," Colleen answered.

"You sure?" walrus prompted.

"Well, no, what I said, that's not quite right," Colleen corrected. "I heard the sound of the doorbell and *then* the shots."

"Quick together?" the woman cop asked. "Or bang . . . *bang*?"

"Not quick," Colleen told them. "One shot, then the other one."

Though the detectives said nothing to each other, did not even look at each other, Colleen thought they were communicating just the same. "Okay, Colleen," the woman said. "Let's go over it again. From the beginning . . ."

" . . . I just . . . I just froze," Colleen said. "I didn't dare come out for the longest time. Even after the doorbell rang again. . . . I was afraid he'd still be out there."

"He," the woman detective said.

"Par' me?" Colleen asked.

"You keep saying 'he,'" she pointed out. "How do you know it was a man?"

"I *don't* know," Colleen said as steadily as she could. "It just . . . it just came out that way."

"Sexist," the walrus said.

Colleen saw he was smiling. This was new. It heartened her. "Uh-huh," she agreed, and smiled back. "That's me. Just as sexist as can be."

The woman cop looked thoughtful. Neither said anything for a mo-

ment. Colleen felt the tightness in her chest lift.

"Once again," the walrus said. "Tell us the whole thing again."

And she did. And this time there were no interruptions. They hardly wrote anything down. As Colleen finished her recitation, she felt herself daring to hope that it was all ending at last. Then a uniformed policeman stepped in and whispered something in the woman cop's ear. She swung on Colleen, fresh interest in her narrow eyes. "No money was taken, it would seem," she said.

Colleen didn't know what to say.

"Wasn't a robbery then," the walrus concluded.

"We got a problem, missy," the woman cop said. "Something just doesn't seem right."

"It's outside the profile," the walrus said.

"I don't know what you mean," Colleen said.

The woman cop's stare burned into her. "You're lying to us," she declared.

"No! No, I'm not!"

"Then how do you explain this?" the male cop asked.

"I can't."

"Try," the woman said.

Colleen looked at them. "God works in mysterious ways?" she said. "His wonders to perform?"

They all sat silent for a long moment.

Then the walrus smiled. "Noth-er way of saying, 'who knows?'" he said, and glanced at his partner. "We see plenty of that, don't we, Nancy."

His partner sighed, expression

rueful. "Yes. Yes, we do." She rose and handed Colleen a card. "You'll call us," she said, "if you think of anything else we should know."

"Oh yes. Sure will." She followed them out into the store. The last uniformed officers were leaving. The counter area looked normal, as normal as it could look without Tim standing there glowering at her. *This is the new "normal,"* she told herself. *This is how it's going to be from now on.* "Thank you," Colleen said.

The detectives glanced at her. "For what?" the woman asked.

"For all your help," Colleen said.

The walrus laughed. "Hey, Nance. When was the last time a citizen thanked us?"

"Approximately never," the other cop said.

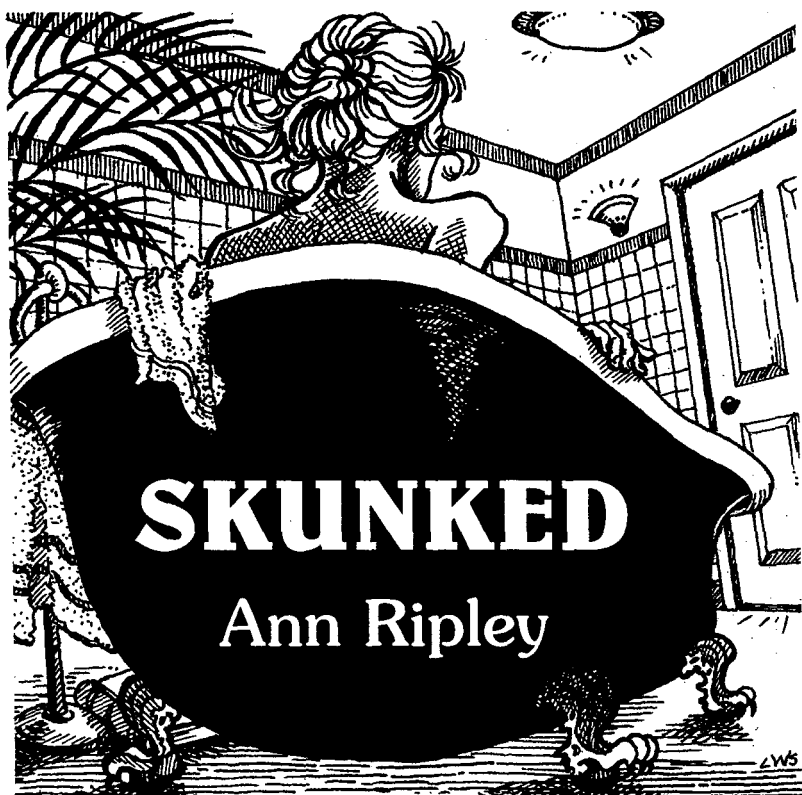
She smiled at Colleen, seeming to see her for the very first time. "You're welcome."

"'Night," Colleen said, and watched them leave. Around her

the store sat waiting. Slowly she scanned all the sights, so familiar, yet somehow so new. The lights, the shelves, the inventory, the cooler; the stockroom, the counter, the cash register—all as they had been before. Yet one thing was different. Behind the counter, the tile floor was smeared nearly black. Blood, she realized. Tim's blood. Without thinking, she seized an apron from under the counter, snapped it open, and tossed it over the place, watching it settle like a shroud. Just like that, he was gone. You could not tell what had happened here, or that Tim had even existed.

Outside, the sun was rising in the distance. Unbelievably, Colleen's scheduled shift would be over in an hour. Two cars were pulling up to the pumps, and a pickup truck was easing into a parking space by the door. As the doorbell did its *ding-ding-ding*, she stepped up to the register, smiled, and got set to welcome her customers.

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**L**ouise Eldridge slipped her body into the deep, hot bath and breathed in the heady fragrance of lavender. The source was a large silver teaball filled with dried lavender flowers that bobbed on the top of the bathwater. With a languorous hand, she trolled the ball closer, the better to smell its spicy fragrance. Then she reached down beside the footed tub, picked up her book of Gertrude Jekyll garden essays, and began to read.

After a paragraph the words were swimming before her tired eyes. She shut the book again and

laid it on the bathmat, then leaned her head back on the porcelain and tried to sleep. If anyone needed sleep, she did. She'd just spent hours cleaning up her yard after one of Washington, D.C.'s violent summer storms. It was heavy labor: hefting plants back into the soggy ground, repairing garden borders, and disposing of windtorn branches.

She was floating in that soft state between waking and sleeping when she heard the muffled crash. Her eyes snapped open, and she sat up with a jolt. Her long brown hair, bound up in a

topknot, was shaken loose from its hairpins by the motion and tumbled to her shoulders.

Who was in her house?

She thought about it for a moment and then gave a little shudder of relief. The explanation was obvious: That afternoon she had brought home a large stack of garden tomes from the library and, in her haste to start her yardwork, had piled them haphazardly on a living room table. They must have toppled over onto the floor.

She checked to be sure her Gertrude Jekyll book was dry, then leaned back again and waited for her heart to resume its normal cadence. Not minding the bottom edge of her hair getting wet, not minding anything—just trying to relax. It was no wonder she was jumpy, for she was dog-tired, every muscle in her body strained. Her family was out of town when this storm came along, and she'd had no help with the cleanup. To get it done she had taken a precious afternoon from her job as garden show hostess on Washington's WTBA-TV.

But she didn't fool herself—it was a labor of love, for Louise was a passionate gardener. Their house was in Sylvan Valley in the northern Virginia suburbs, handy for her husband's commute downtown to the State Department and hers to the television studio in western Fairfax County. In Louise's mind it was a perfect house—a modern little place with floor-to-ceiling glass windows and sliding glass doors. She'd added her own touches in the two years since she

and Bill had bought it, transforming the wooded lot with naturalized gardens and flowering shrubs and making it into a bit of a showcase, as befitted the home of a TV garden show hostess. Her frustration these days was that her job afforded her more money to buy plants but less time to plant and care for them.

Today was an example: despite slaving away all afternoon she still hadn't finished the yard. In the far corner of the property a jam-up of brush and branches had flooded the bog garden. Now her beloved bog plants sat in several feet of water rather than the few inches they preferred. She was particularly worried about one of her favorites, *Sagittaria japonica* "Flore Pleno," toppled over and floating on the water like Tennyson's Lady of Shalott. Tomorrow morning she'd get up before work and try to replant it.

She yawned, but sleep wouldn't come again. Her mind was filled with thoughts of undone tasks that would leave little time for gardening. She was working on a pile of rough scripts for her show, *Gardening with Nature*, prepared by Rachel, the program's script writer. Louise was to supply her edits and the special stamp of what Rachel called Louise's "droll humor." That wasn't as easy as it sounded, and she could spend weeks fussing with the lines in the scripts. But she didn't have weeks, only days until her producer was due to see them. She would get out of this lovely bath and do more work tonight. That would fill the empty

hour or so before Janie came home. Her seventeen-year-old daughter was at a friend's cottage and due back tonight, with Bill returning from his business trip tomorrow.

Meantime, she was very much alone, with most of her neighbors away on vacations and the Mougeys, just across the cul-de-sac, gone to a funeral. Oh, it was true her next-door neighbor Sam Rosen was in town. She smiled. The jolly Sam always claimed Louise could count on him when Bill was away, though this was a bit of an empty gesture, as he practically spent his whole life at his job on Capitol Hill. On weekends Sam and Louise often gardened together in their adjoining yards. She had taught him how to do it and gave him little perennial starts for what was now a charming patio garden at his place. Now, like a convert to a new sport, he had all the latest and biggest garden equipment, which he generously lent to Louise and Bill when they needed it.

She began to relax again, stretching luxuriously and raising a long leg from the water as if she were Jean Harlow in a thirties movie. After all, she had a thirties-style bathtub, and this was her first lavender bath. Then a niggling worry crawled into her mind, and she turned her head to look at the bathroom door. She should have made sure about that noise. She called, loudly, "Janie, was that you?"

There was no answer. "Bill, was that you?" It would be extraordinary if it were Bill, since he was too well-organized not to inform her of a change in travel plans.

A little discomfited, she tried to remember how she and Bill had left it: he would take the cell phone with him, and she would keep the Beretta at home with her. A man whose State Department job was simply a cover for his work with the CIA occasionally needed a Beretta, but not on this trip. So she had no real worry: she had access to a gun.


It had to be the books falling, she decided.

Suddenly music blared through the house. A chill ran through her like an electric shock, and she flung herself up and out of the tub, sloshing water all over the floor and the book. She grabbed her towel and pulled it around her like a shield. To her dismay her heart began thumping dangerously again. She felt herself swaying, nearly overcome with dizziness, and placed a trembling hand against the tile wall for support.

Someone was in her house. Whoever it was had brought his own music and was playing it at top volume. It was an impertinent, raucous song with undiscernible words, crying rebellion against all that was peaceful, orderly, and sane. Scariest of all, she realized she had heard that song before, and recently.

She had to escape, but first she took a deep breath and willed herself to keep calm. She rubbed herself dry and pulled on the sweaty gardening clothes she had discarded in the hamper. No time for a bra, just her panties, shorts, and T-shirt. Before her lay two choices of shoes—her flipflop bath slippers





and her gardening boots. She chose the boots and pulled them on. As she crouched down to tie them, the rude music forced her to focus on what was happening outside her bedroom door. Her locked bedroom door, she now remembered. Fortunately, it was an automatic impulse of hers to lock it when she was alone and taking a bath. That would give her more precious seconds to get away. She swiftly tied the second lace and headed for her escape hatch—the sliding door that led out of her and Bill’s master bedroom into the front yard.

When she heard another crash, she paused. It was the konky sound of broken pottery hitting the floor. Someone was not only out there in the house, he was out there deliberately ruining things. Smashing things, possibly their Acoma Indian pot on a stand, or the Satsuma bowl. “Oh no,” she groaned, feeling the hopelessness of one who is dealing with an irrational force beyond all control. But bowls or pots weren’t the main things she was concerned about: her half season of television scripts lay on the dining room table, edited once with care by Rachel, and once so far by her. She hated to leave the house and let someone destroy that work—and destroy it he would if he discovered what it was. For she was almost certain she knew the identity of this intruder.

She stood at the sliding doors that would allow her to escape, trying to decide what to do. Then, she heard it—that dull voice, with

its frightening zombie quality: “Hi, Mrs. Eldridge, the chicken’s come home to roost.”

Eddie Mougey.

Mary and Richard Mougey lived directly across the street, and like the others in their cul-de-sac, were friends as well as neighbors. Richard worked for the State Department, like Bill. His wife, Mary, was the charming, high-powered director of the International Children’s Aid Fund, a do-gooder right down to her toes. Louise always loved her for her compassion, only questioning it recently when the childless Mary agreed to rehabilitate a wayward nephew, the seventeen-year-old son of Richard’s younger brother. Not only did he have a juvenile record, but his current behavior apparently augured to make the record longer. The soft-hearted Mary took on the boy after his parents, who lived only ten miles away in Arlington, were about to put him in a prisonlike youth school.

Eddie was a tall, handsome young man with a slightly top-heavy appearance. He had a large head covered with wavy hair and big, brown eyes that gleamed with trouble. “Eddie used to be just fine,” Mary told Louise. “Why, he was a record-breaking sprinter as a high school freshman. Then, drugs threw him completely off track. He needs a little time away from his parents, and structure—work, church, family togetherness—things that his life has lacked until now.” Mary was hazy and somewhat embarrassed about Eddie’s latest brush with the law—“I

believe it involved a charge of date rape, though never proved, you know . . . ”

Louise made up her mind right then, and Bill agreed: at all costs they would shield Janie from this noxious young fellow. Their daughter's job at an Alexandria daycare center plus overnights with friends and now this long weekend away from home succeeded in doing that. The young man rarely glimpsed their lovely blonde daughter.

But Louise heard of Eddie's dreary exploits as she and Mary crossed paths on their way to and from their jobs. Adding structure to Eddie's life was easier said than done. He played tennis once with the young males in the neighborhood, and even though they were tennis experts, he beat them at their game with his killer serve. Then he threw down his racquet and declared his uninterest in the Sylvan Valley boys' crowd. He worked at a promising summer job Richard had found for him for two weeks, then was fired. To Mary's disappointment, he refused even to accompany his aunt and uncle to church and tended to slip away with his friends when scheduled to do things such as job-hunt.

Yesterday Mary Mougey heard that her mother had died unexpectedly in North Carolina. She left a brief phone message at the Eldridge house before they left for the funeral, saying that she was sending Eddie home to his family; furthermore, she and Richard weren't sure if they would resume their surrogate parent roles when they came home.

In other words, the Mougeys' house was supposed to be empty for a few days. Eddie might have left briefly, but he had come right back. Last night Louise had been at home working on her scripts with the doors and windows closed and air conditioning on. The music still rocked her—blatting, rude, antisocial music. She'd gone outside to discover that the Mougeys' house was brilliant with lights and erupting with sound from every aperture. Couples flitted through the yard, laughing. Was it a bacchanalia or just youthful good times? At first she told herself not to be a prude about it, shoving away her questions about why Eddie was here instead of in Arlington. Nevertheless, she went back inside but turned off the AC and opened the windows. A little later she heard the screams. They evoked alarming memories of Eddie's previous offense. She called the police.

After one of the officers consulted her as the complaining party, Louise had observed the proceedings from the shadows of the yellowwood tree in her front yard. She watched the police snuff the party out, watched Eddie handcuffed and hustled away in a police car. But as he was shoved unceremoniously into the back seat, it was as if he could see her through the tree's fat leaves and long white panicles of flowers. “Hey, neighbor,” he called, “you had to report us, didn't you?”

For a moment, she'd felt a sense of guilt but pushed it aside and went back in her house, relieved

that Eddie wouldn't be returning to the neighborhood.

How wrong she had been! For he was outside her bedroom door right now, and any minute would break it down and get in. Yet she hadn't done the obvious yet—call the police. She grabbed the phone, her index finger ready to punch in 911, but the line was dead. She drew in a big, scared breath of air. This wasn't fun and games: Eddie Mougey was out for revenge. Bill had not left her the Beretta for nothing, after all, she thought with relief. The gun was just a few feet away, locked in a special box in the chifforobe.

As she reached for the chifforobe door knob, the gun scene of five days ago came back to her. It was the night before Bill left town. Louise, running her hand through her husband's blond hair and joshing with him about needing the cell phone more than the gun. Bill, making sure the gun was loaded, locking it in the mahogany box for safekeeping, setting the key on the living room table and advising Louise to find a good place to keep it. Later the two of them rushing to neaten up the house for unexpected guests, putting the gun away in the bedroom—and forgetting the tiny key on the table.

How handy for the thug out there, she thought ruefully, if only he knew what that key was for. She was about to rummage through the chifforobe just to double check when she heard the metallic sound of the intruder picking the lock of the bedroom door.

"Here I come," he called in that

chilling, monotone voice. Louise ran to the sliding glass doors, fumbled with the latch and finally pushed it down, and clawed the door open. She sprinted into the yard beyond the pool of amber cast by the house floodlights and into the safe darkness of the woods. She stood, bent over, with hands on knees, gasping for breath. Then she looked back at her house.

"You creep," she growled. The cocky young man strutted around the bedroom as if he owned it. He checked the closets and the adjoining bathroom, then paused at the still-open sliding glass door. Even from fifty feet away there was something otherworldly about him as his head jerked first one way, and then another. She was sure Eddie Mougey was on drugs.

Then he disappeared from sight. She had been hoping he would follow her outside. Instead, she could hear the crash of broken glass on a wooden floor as he proceeded through the house like an angry bull and toppled the plant-filled étagère in Janie's room. He was headed in the direction of the dining room and her scripts.

Louise could easily get away now and call the police, but it would take five minutes or more to find sleeping neighbors down the road who were willing to open their door to a stranger. Not only was that plenty of time to destroy her precious scripts but it posed a worse danger, one that terrified her even to think of it: her daughter could arrive home as soon as she ran off for help. She could just picture Janie arriving. In time-

honored independent fashion, she would insist that her friend's parents let her out at the street. Then she would saunter her solitary way down the moss-covered flagstones and straight into the arms of this doped-up young sadist with a history of rape.

Granted that Eddie was a very scary fellow, but there had to be another way to deal with him. Louise was not about to put her daughter in this kind of danger. She had to handle it herself—and without wasting much time. She took off for the back yard, expertly maneuvering over the soggy, uneven ground and around trees, bushes, and plants.

Suddenly it came to her: her advantage over Eddie was that he was on her turf.

She hid behind a clump of azaleas and saw the youth had made himself at home, pulling open the curtains that covered the big glass windows and doors. Good: she now could see any movement he made in the living room, dining room, and recreation room. She experienced a painful twinge in her breast as she realized that she could no longer see her Acoma pot on its stand in the living room. Furthermore, he had left the doors to the patio wide open, no doubt letting in swarms of mosquitoes that had bred in the puddles after the rain. Yet this open door would also prove to be to her advantage because now he could hear her if she chose to make a sound. She watched him walk through to the dining room, venture a few feet into the family room to turn off the


stereo, then return to the dining room.

All was silence indoors and out. As she saw Eddie stoop down and begin to read her television scripts, Louise swore under her breath. Any minute now he would do some fool thing with them—set them on fire or maybe tear them to bits. She looked around, desperate for something, anything, to distract him.

A dead branch that had “self-trimmed” during the huge storm last week lay close by. She grabbed it and broke it across her bare knee, grimacing with pain, for swamp oak was tough wood. It obligingly made a cracking sound that echoed through the quiet night. Eddie's big head popped up, and he sauntered to the open doors and stepped out onto the patio. He combed his hair back out of his eyes with his fingers as if getting ready for an invisible audience. The soul of comfort, he had taken off his sneakers and was now walking around barefoot. “Oho there, lady,” he called to the woods at large, “still here? Wait a livin' minute and I'll be right with you, faster than a fox.”

At least she'd gained his attention. Now what? She shivered with the thought of what might happen next. She was not going to win a foot race with a champion sprinter.

Eddie was on the sofa in the living room, crouched over tying his tennis shoes. It seemed safe to approach the house. The only weapons she could think of were in her garden storage shed, which opened



off the patio at the back of the house and was perilously close to the open patio doors. She moved silently across to the shed, let herself in, closed the door, and turned on the light. For the first time in her life she wished she owned a chemical poison spray to zap this guy. She needed something special, and not too large. A hoe, a scythe, or a cultivator might be turned against her. Perhaps her broken tree saw with its lethal stump of a blade . . .

Almost absently she picked up a little bundle of material she'd put on the shelf this afternoon, for whatever good it might do her. Her hand had nearly grasped the broken saw when she jumped, startled. Eddie's voice was almost outside the door. "I'm comin' now," he called in his lifeless voice. "Get ready." Her heart began to race as she frantically looked around for a place to conceal herself. She reached up and loosened the light-bulb, then dived for the only possible hiding place, the corner of the shed, where she curled herself into a ball beneath the fan-shaped feeder of Bill's wood chipper. The door opened, and she held her breath. "Not hidin' in here, are you?" he asked. He tried the light switch. "Hell," he said, looked around for an instant, then slammed the door shut. She could hear him call into the woods, where obviously he thought she still was hiding. "I'm goin' in for one of your husband's beers. Be right with you."

This was her last chance to carry out a diversionary plan. Clutching

the material tightly to her breast, she slipped out of the shed and streaked straight across the patio, nearly colliding with a *Pieris japonica* bush that definitely needed trimming. Then she was down the steps, beyond the flood-lights' amber glow, and into the woods. She arrived quickly at the far corner. Behind her was a huge stand of the neighbors' bamboo. To her right was the edge of Sam Rosen's property. In front of her was her watery bog garden, with its many plants in disarray. The disappointingly droopy floating arrowroot, *Sagittaria japonica*. The tipsy-looking *Iris pseudacorus* and cannas, their roots gravely disturbed. Only the *Symplocarpus foetidus* was indomitable and erect, too tough to be bothered by a mere summer storm. Its roots went down to China. The glittering surface of the water was masked beneath a blanket of duckweed.

At last she was right where she wanted to be. She had a good view of the patio forty yards away, fully as good as a cheap seat at a Broadway play. She felt almost as if she were witnessing one. Eddie Mougey strutted out of the house, well aware her eyes were on him. Raised victoriously in his right hand was a beer bottle; in his left, something that glinted in the light. From his mouth a lighted cigarette dangled. On the back of his head was perched a poorly fitting hat, Bill's decrepit old work hat Eddie had plucked off the rack in the back hall. For a tiny instant, Louise felt sorry for a kid who had to do such crazy, illegal things to

get attention and then put on the trappings of the person whose house he'd broken into.

He waved his left hand and called, "Hey, lady, you've hidden this daughter from me. It's about time for the two of us to become friends." It was a framed picture of Janie. "It's Janie, isn't it? Janie Eldridge—love that long blonde hair. Bet the girl will be home pretty soon—I know y' wouldn't let her stay out too late." His voice dropped to a mutter. "But the mother's good, too—I might have to make do with the mother . . ."

Her daughter could arrive any minute. Louise swallowed down the fright she felt and shoved her hair out of her eyes. It was no time to get scared; it was time to lure him on and get the job done so Janie would not be in danger. She easily located another branch and broke it in two pieces, at the same time emitting a high, pathetic groan as if she were hurt and trying to get back on her feet. It was a plausible scenario, and Eddie apparently believed it, for he turned in her direction, relieved at locating her in the darkness. He called, "You've gone and busted something, haven't you, stumblin' out there in the dark. Let me come help you." He threw aside his cigarette and started to move.

He leapt from the patio and bounced across the ground with frightening speed, holding high both the picture and the beer. Suddenly she was frozen, unable to move if she'd had to. How did she ever think she could outwit a big brute like this?

In her own hands she clutched her only weapon, and a homely one at that: a hunk of folded material. She had to go on with her simple plan, for it was too late to get away. She encouragingly let out one more loud moan.

Eddie pranced confidently toward her—an invincible youth sprinting through the forest. The only thing between him and Louise was the flooded bog garden.

It was as hard to see as an iceberg in a calm night ocean.

The beer bottle and Janie's picture went flying as he plunged into three feet of clayey muck. He cried, "Crap!" and grabbed for support from the flimsy fronds of a cyperus plant. Try as he might, he could not right himself, and she could tell from the watery gurgles that his head had gone under the muddy water. He emerged, spluttering, and spat out, "What have you done to me, bitch?" She noticed he seemed much more expressive about things now that his own well-being was at stake. When he tried to stand upright in the profusion of plants, it was as if he were a baby who had forgotten how to balance. He heaved about in the water like someone having a fit.

Louise went about her plan. If only she'd had time to grab a flashlight, her work would have been easier. As it was, she'd have to do it in the dark with only the backlighting from the patio to aid her. She shook open the hunk of material clutched in her hand—a twenty-foot-square section of bird netting that had covered the dwarf cherry tree and kept the birds



from eating the ripe fruit. She had just removed it from the tree this afternoon and put it away for the season.

Eddie was making plenty of angry noises—in fact she had never heard such curses—and was creating big sucking sounds as he tried to free his legs from the muck-filled pond. This all proved helpful in locating his approximate position. Suddenly he solved the illumination problem by turning on a little flashlight he'd groped out of his pocket. He cast its light about to get his bearings, enabling Louise to do the same. Then he pointed it straight into Louise's eyes.

"Bitch!" he said again.

"Skip the profanity, Eddie," she said coolly. "It's getting boring, and you've already expressed your feelings." She sniffed the air and smiled; it was going to get worse for the lad. His floundering had broken off several tall, fat leaves from the *Symplocarpus foetidus*—or skunk cabbage. They lay near him like flotsam on top of the duckweed and were beginning to fill the air with their putrid smell. Eddie just hadn't noticed it yet.

"My God," he whined as he thrashed about, "where am I, in quicksand? Get me out of here!"

"It's not exactly quicksand," she assured him, "though we may need a board to remove you—" She stopped herself; she was being way too nice. Slyly she added, "That bog does have some icky things in it, Eddie—leeches, night crawlers, probably a few small snakes..."

"Snakes!" he screamed, and con-

tinued to pull his feet up, first one, then the other, and in the process nearly losing his balance again. "Hey," he cried as the released plant juices wafted over to him, "something's died in here—what's that smell? Are you trying to poison me?"

"You don't like the smell?"

"What do you think? No, I don't like the smell..." He realized he would do better if he controlled his hysteria. His voice reverted to a monotone as he slipped back into his familiar role as a manipulator of adults. "Look, Mrs. Eldridge, I mean this: if you get me out of here, I promise I'll never bother you or your family again."

She didn't reply because she was too busy just then putting the net in position. As she went about her work, she decided a little garden lecture couldn't hurt a young man like Eddie. "That smell is skunk cabbage, Eddie. It's a common plant, very odoriferous but a favorite of small insects and animals because of its inner warmth in winter. There is both an eastern and a western skunk cabbage—did you know that?"

"All I know is it stinks to high heaven."

She was ready now. With a strong movement of her arm she flipped the large square of bird netting over the part of Eddie Mougey that wasn't submerged. "Oh no you don't," he cried, flailing his arms and flipping away the flashlight in the process. She quickly but carefully moved in a circle around the edge of the bog, pulling the netting tight. Eddie

was soon secured like an insect in the web of a spider.

She examined her finished package as best she could and then concluded her little lecture. "There's no doubt, Eddie, that the western form of skunk cabbage, *Lysichitum americanum*, is handsomer than the eastern variety, *Symplocarpus foetidus*. And you of all people know how 'handsome' can pay off—though someday you might wise up and discover brains are better than a goodlooking face."

Louise held the corner of the net with both hands. Since the flashlight was deep-sixed, the two of them stood in the dark not five feet from each other. She pulled in a shuddering little breath of air and hoped Eddie didn't know how nervous she was. What could she do with her tormenter? Even now the shrewd young man was trying to unwind the net as she circled in the opposite direction to keep it tight.

She could hear a car driving into the cul-de-sac. Then Sam Rosen's headlights cut through the darkness.

She gave a sob of relief, not caring whether Eddie Mougey heard it. It had been a long day in the garden, way too long, and she could sorely use a garden helper like Sam. As soon as she heard his car door slam, she screamed out his name.

"Sam! I need you. It's Louise . . . I'm in the bog garden."

In the quiet night her neighbor had no trouble hearing her. "Holy hell, Louise—you're where? I know how you love to work out there, but isn't this carrying it too far?"

"Please hurry." Though she wasn't cold, her lips were trembling.

Sam Rosen came the rest of the way up his lighted driveway and stepped into the dark woods. As he carefully picked his way over to the bog garden, he grumbled, "Man, it's dark out here—why don't you have a flashlight?"

"Watch where you walk," she said. "The garden's flooded, you know."

"Don't I know that. I thought you were going to have a funeral service the other day for the arrowroot. Louise, does helping you mean I have to get my Guccis muddy?"

"Don't be too funny, Sam. This is serious." Then he heard Eddie Mougey let out a stream of expletives as he faltered in his struggle to keep his balance.

"Holy cow," said Sam, "who's that in the water, Louise? And what's that disgusting odor?"

"I've netted something really smelly here," she explained. "Just think of it as another garden chore because we're going to need that big new wheelbarrow of yours to cart it away."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# MR. TUTT FIGHTS A DRAW

Arthur Train



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/99

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**T**he Santapedia, which flows into the Bay of Chaleur at Ste. Marie des Isles, is one of the most celebrated salmon streams in Canada. On it is located the Wanic Club, which owns perhaps the best fishing water in the world and is composed of six eminent men: Sewell T. Warburton, president of the Utopia Trust Company of New York; Sidney Arbuthnot, president of British Columbian Railways; George R. Norton, president of the British Colonial Trust Company; Chester L. Ives, president of the Royal British Bank of Canada; the Right Reverend Lionel Charteris, Bishop of St. Albans; and—last but not least—Mr. Ephraim Tutt, honorary member. How the latter achieved his place in this Olympian body of sportsmen may be read in a piscatorial chronicle entitled “Mr. Tutt’s Revenge”—but a lot of water has flowed over the rapids of “Push-and-be-damned” and through the “Ox Bow” since that happened.

Mr. Tutt had had the happiest three weeks of his life in outdoor companionship with the most congenial men he knew. Regretfully, surrounded by his old friends, he left the clubhouse verandah and walked down to the little beach, where his seventy-nine-year-old guide, Donald McKay, was waiting in the canoe to paddle him back to civilization. Clad in khaki breeches and high laced boots he nevertheless wore his ancient stovepipe hat tilted on the back of his head, the only way to carry it as he explained.

“Well, Eph,” said Bishop Charteris, taking both the gnarled old hands in his, “goodbye until next year—and God bless you!”

“Thanks, my lord,” smiled the old lawyer. “Sorry I can’t bestow my episcopal benediction in return, but you’re a swell guy and I wish you luck!”

“Goodbye!—Goodbye, old man!”

“Here’s your lunch, Mr. Tutt!” interrupted Charles, the decrepit Negro functionary who had served as the Wanic’s butler, valet, cook, waiter, barkeep, and private orchestra for the past thirty-five years. “I done slip in a bottle of the bishop’s madeira,” he added in a whisper.

“You damned old thief!” Mr. Tutt slapped him on the back. “Well, boys, so long! Leave a few fish! If anyone hooks Leviathan again, send me a wire.” He stepped into the canoe, settled himself against a gunysack, and lit a stogy.

“Do you expect to make Ste. Marie des Isles tonight?” asked Charteris.

“Easily. Donald and I will ‘boil’ as he calls it at Portage Brook, reach the Nipsi by four o’clock, and be at the George in Ste. Marie in time for supper. I’ll get a good night’s sleep and catch The Whooper when it comes through at five tomorrow morning.”

“I’ve got a better idea than that,” said the president of the British Colonial Trust Company. “You know where the Canadian Seaboard and

Gaspe crosses the river below the Stillwater Pool twenty miles above Ste. Marie? Old man Micklejohn of Montreal has a camp there. He's leased most of the land on that part of the river, enough to give him a practical monopoly of the fishing rights although I believe there's a farmer owns a short strip on the other side. I'll call up Micklejohn and tell him you're coming, and you can spend the night with him. That will give you time to fish the Stillwater before dark."

"But I'd have to get up by three o'clock tomorrow morning and paddle the twenty miles down river to Ste. Marie or miss my train," protested Mr. Tutt. "You forget I'm getting old."

"No, you wouldn't," retorted Norton. "That's the point. Micklejohn's camp is just above the railroad, and under the law, the train has to stop there for three minutes because it's a drawbridge."

"You're wrong about that," said Sidney Arbuthnot, president of British Columbian Railways. "The train doesn't have to stop unless the draw is open, which it hasn't been in fourteen years. The reason it stops is because Micklejohn, who is president of the company, orders it to. He gets all his mail, ice, milk, and eggs, everything he needs, that way fresh every morning, just as conveniently as if he was at home."

"What a cinch you Canadian railroad men have," laughed Sewell Warburton, shaking this head. "Imagine what would happen if the president of the New York, New Haven and Hartford ordered the Yankee Clipper stopped at his country place to deliver his groceries!"

"Yes, but there's some difference between The Whooper and The Yankee Clipper," commented Chester Ives.

"A difference of about fifty-five miles an hour!" nodded the bishop.

"Well, anyhow," continued Norton. "The point is that, whatever the reason, The Whooper stops at the bridge, and that, by taking it there, you can save the trip by river to Ste. Marie besides having a chance to fish the best pool in the province."

"Sounds good to me!" declared Mr. Tutt. "I've always wanted to throw a fly over the Stillwater."

"I'll call up Micklejohn at once," said Norton, "and tell him to be sure to have the train stop for you. I know he's there."

"Sure he's there!" grunted Donald McKay—and spat over the side of the canoe.

"But will he want me to spend the night with him? Suppose he should be full?" said Mr. Tutt.

"He'll be full all right!" muttered Donald.

"There'll be plenty of room," Norton assured him. "Micklejohn never has any guests."

"Well, goodbye!" Mr. Tutt waved his stogy. "Goodbye and tight lines to all of you!—Let her go, Donald!"

They pushed out into the stream. Against the high bank below the

clubhouse stood his five friends waving their farewells. A lump came into his throat. God bless 'em! They were the best—the top! Fishermen always were!

For the first hour, with his long legs stretched comfortably before him, Mr. Tutt cast lazily with his trout rod, first right, then left, while Donald McKay paddled him swiftly down the Santapedia; then as the sun grew hotter he unjointed the rod, put it with the others in his leather case and abandoned himself to admiring the passing scenery and to ruminating upon the river's history. To the north as far as the St. Lawrence stretched an unbroken wilderness penetrated only by rough logging roads. At rare intervals the eye caught broken patches, thick with birch and maple, which had once been clearings, but the few pioneer settlers had vanished long ago and now one could paddle half a day without encountering another human being. It had always been a great salmon river, the water closely held under individual leases, ever since a sporting Governor-General of the Dominion had discovered its possibilities half a century before, although owing to the lumbering of its watersheds it had steadily dwindled in size throughout that period and many former fishing camps had been abandoned.

Twenty miles below the Wanic they passed a pine-covered buff above a sand spit. "Joe Jefferson had a camp in those trees," said Donald, pointing to a pile of rotting timber. "I poled him and Grover Cleveland upriver first time they come. Must ha' been forty years ago. Boy! They was hell on fishin'!"

"And on telling stories?" suggested Mr. Tutt.

"And tellin' stories!" agreed Donald. "Say, the loggers are tellin' those same yarns up in the back country yet."

At noon they beached the canoe to "boil" at a bend beside a foaming stream where the woods had been cut back for perhaps a third of a mile, and while Donald built the fire and put on the teapot Mr. Tutt followed the brook through the alders and undergrowth. All was still under the noonday heat except for the chitter of squirrels or the splash of a kingfisher, dipping in syncopated flight ahead of him. A hundred yards or so from the river he came upon some overgrown depressions, their bottoms half filled with stones, and farther back upon some elevated oblong mounds. Poking among the bushes he stumbled upon a piece of rusted iron half eaten away.

"Must have been some houses in there once," he remarked to Donald, exhibiting his find.

"Sure," answered the old guide from where he squatted with the frying pan of bacon in his hand. "This is where the old French Village used to be. There's treasure buried there if you can find it. I've hunted for it many a time when I was a boy."

"What kind of treasure?"



"Gold, money. A hundred and seventy years ago this was all French country. Ste. Marie des Isles was one of their big towns. When the war with the English come, the inhabitants all got scairt and moved upriver to where they thought they'd be safe. Three hundred came here with their children and everything they had. They settled along that stream and built their houses. Nobody came after 'em, and they stayed there for twenty years or so. Then the smallpox killed 'em all off—nary one was left! There's a pile of money buried in there somewheres!"

"How far are we from Ste. Marie?"

"About eighty miles."

"And to the Stillwater?"

"Sixty. We'll get there easy by six o'clock."

They devoured Charles's excellent lunch, carefully extinguished the tiny fire, drank a tin cup each of the bishop's madeira, and pushed off again. Each of the old men had a stogy between his lips, while the bottle with its remaining contents stood embedded between Mr. Tutt's legs. He was very happy, peaceful, and satisfied. He had killed his limit, he was full of fresh air and good food, the sunlight flecked the ripples on the river, a soft breeze laden with the scent of balsam drew down the gullies—God was in his heaven, all was right with the world! Mr. Tutt unbuttoned his waistcoat, extended himself longitudinally as far as possible, and took another drink. This was the life! Those French fleeing from their enemies had selected a good place. A bit cold in winter perhaps. But think what the fishing must have been in those old days! And yet they were all gone!

The sun lowered towards the pinetops in a cloudless sky; the breeze died; amid a silence unbroken save for the gurgle of the current against the sides of the canoe they were swept swiftly downstream. The shadows of the trees were lengthening across the river as, about five o'clock, they passed the "Ox-Box"—the pool next above the Stillwater ten miles farther on. A couple of sportsmen were just getting into their canoes for the evening fishing. Then the forest closed about them again, the banks narrowed, and they entered a long stretch of rapids, where Donald let the canoe run, steering it with his paddle.

"Another twenty minutes and we'll be at the Stillwater," he said. "Better set up your rod. There's half a dozen drops, and it'll take us over an hour to fish it before we get to Micklejohn's."

By the time Mr. Tutt had put his rod together and selected his gear they had shot the rapids and emerged into a smiling farmland, the river broadening to lush meadows high with grass on either side. A mile ahead below a series of sparkling reaches lay the railroad bridge. They had reached the famous Stillwater.

Donald shoved the canoe into a shady backwater sheltered by tall trees while Mr. Tutt adjusted his leader.

"There was a town here once, too," he remarked. "Although you'd never guess it. There's only one family left—Jim Ferguson's."

Mr. Tutt looked across the river. "Isn't that the remains of an old wharf?"

"Yes, but it's all fallen to pieces. This is a great place for hay. In the old days they used to barge it down to Ste. Marie des Isles. Jim made good money until he was burned out.—The first drop's over there. I'd use a Black Gnat."

While the old gentleman was tying on his fly, there rose from the woods beside them a series of birdcalls more melodious than anything he had ever heard. The notes rose and fell in chirpings now like scattered drops of crystal, now in silver trills and quavers, followed by the mellow arpeggio of the Canadian thrush, until Mr. Tutt found himself, like Siegfried, staring entranced into the boughs above his head.

"Exquisite!" he murmured. "The mellow ousel fluting in the elm! What sort of bird is it?"

Donald grinned. "Burrd!—That ain't no burrd! It's a woman!"

Thrusting his paddle into the water he silently shoved the canoe around a boulder that cut off the view of the bank fifty yards beyond.

The song ceased suddenly in the midst of a cadenza. A young girl, her black curls tied gypsylike in a red handkerchief, was sitting on a log with her head thrown back against a rock, her open khaki shirt exposing her white throat. Her brown eyes, startled at their unheralded approach, quickly regained their confidence. "Hello, Mr. McKay!" she called in a voice as sweet as the notes she had been uttering.

"Please don't stop!" begged Mr. Tutt. "I'd rather listen to you than fish!"

"He thought you was a burrd!" laughed Donald. "I don't blame him neither! Many's the time you've fooled me with your veery calls and your warblers!"

"They often answer me at this time of day," she said. "The thrushes at twilight especially." From the grove behind them echoed a golden canzonet. "Hark! Do you hear that one?"

"Sure!" declared Donald. "Your mate's a-callin' you!—Is your dad to home?"

"Yes!" she said. "I'm sure he'd like to see you!"

"Tell him I'll be over after supper, or maybe before!" answered Donald with a grimace.

"Are you going to fish the Stillwater? There's a run on. I saw a lot of big ones on their way up the river from the bridge last evening. Mr. Micklejohn killed a forty-pounder this morning."

"Who is that lucky child?" asked Mr. Tutt as, the Black Gnat having been properly fastened, he told Donald to shove off.

"Jim Ferguson's girl. Clochette they call her. Her mother's French."

"A charming creature! She has a wonderful voice!"

"You bet she has. Some folks say she could sing in grand opry."

"Is she getting proper instruction?"

"Jim's been sendin' her to Boston every winter for the last three years. He's mighty proud of her, I tell ye! We all are, for that matter. But she's got to give it up."

"Why?"

"Her dad lost everything he had in the fire. Ain't even got a house no more. They're campin' out in tents this summer."

The canoe slid out into midstream and floated towards the head of a wide sunflecked stretch alive with ripples. Donald dropped the killick overboard into the translucent water, here only from three to six feet deep, dug in his paddle to steady the canoe, and Mr. Tutt, lifting his rod, cast at right angles across the stream. The fly settled lightly on the current and was sucked rapidly along and under. Gradually the arc of the line straightened out, and he was just about to make another cast when the tip of the rod was drawn heavily downward, the water boiled as from the turn of a propeller, and the line began to run through the guides.

Mr. Tutt struck lightly—against a dead weight. Next instant the reel was screaming, the line melting away, humming like a telegraph wire in a sixty-mile gale. He anchored the butt in his belt socket, braced his feet, and held tight. It was as if he were connected with a plunging racehorse. Far downstream there was a silver gleam as the salmon broke. The strain slackened momentarily, and the old man reeled in as fast as he could. Then the reel began to scream again, and once more the spool melted away.

"He's headed for salt water!" shouted Donald, pulling the killick. "We got to follow him!"

"Hurry!" gasped the old man, pressing down the drag of the reel with all his force. "I haven't got more than thirty yards left!"

Donald dropped the killick into the canoe with a thud, yanked free his paddle, threw his whole weight against it, and the canoe shot downstream. The reel stopped screaming and Mr. Tutt, heaving the rod against his ancient belly, began foot by foot to regain his line. But this did not disconcert the salmon, which had evidently made up its mind that it had important business in Ste. Marie des Isles and intended to get there immediately. Aided by Donald's strenuous paddling and the strength of the current, the big fish towed them along at fifteen miles an hour. The shores slid by. The railroad bridge drew nearer and nearer. The half dozen buildings composing Micklejohn's camp, with the Canadian flag flapping above them, swept into view.

Suddenly the salmon broke again, hurling itself end over end high into the air in a rainbow of silver and dropping flat with a crash that churned the surface into foam. Mr. Tutt reeled furiously. The line came

in slack, then gradually tightened, running out towards the riffle at the outlet of the pool just above the bridge. The salmon had decided that he needed a rest and that for the moment at least, he had gone far enough. Swiftly the current carried them towards where the great fish lay skulking in mid-channel until they were almost directly above him. Mr. Tutt had regained most of his line and was ready for another dash—to Anticosti if need be.

"Keep your line tight or he may work free!" warned Donald. "He's anchored there. Got his head agin' a rock prob'ly."

It was too deep to reach the salmon with a gaff or otherwise to dislodge him; neither was it possible to maintain their position in the face of the current. So while Mr. Tutt continued a steady strain upon the line, Donald swung the canoe inshore and held it firmly with paddle.

"He'll get sick of it 'fore long!" he said. "We've got to be ready to start whenever he does."

Mr. Tutt sat there, the butt of the rod against his diaphragm, his eyes fastened upon the point where his taut line entered the water seventy feet distant, waiting for something to happen. It did.

There was a scattering of gravel from the bank behind them, the sound of heavy breathing, and before the old man could turn his head, a hunting knife held by a brawny hand descended and severed his line.

"Ping!" Mr. Tutt, thus unexpectedly released from frontal strain, was only saved from falling backward into the canoe by the gunny sack behind him.

"Jumping Jehoshaphat!" he ejaculated, grabbing at his stovepipe. "What's happened!"

The owner of the knife, a huge bearded man in waders, stood lowering at him beneath shaggy black eyebrows. "Get off my land!" he ordered.

Donald drove the canoe back into the river.

"And off my water!" yelled their assailant after them. "Get off—and stay off!"

Mr. Tutt was trembling with outraged indignation. The line attached to the salmon had vanished into oblivion. No doubt it was already on its way to Ste. Marie des Isles.

"Micklejohn!" muttered Donald shortly, squirting a thin brown stream in the direction of the shore.

"The man we expected to spend the night with?"

"We didn't. Maybe *you* did. I've known him longer than Mr. Norton has."

"That fellow the president of a railroad!"

"He owns it," explained Donald.

Micklejohn, having sheathed his hunting knife, was seated cross-legged upon the bank watching them.

"Get along!" he shouted. "Beat it!"

"Mr. Micklejohn," said Mr. Tutt raising his voice so that it would carry across the intervening distance, "you have made me lose a brand new twelve foot double leader and a hundred and fifty yards of line. I shall expect you to pay for them."

"Like hell! They were forfeit under the statutes," shouted Micklejohn. "I could have kept your rod, too. I'm going to telephone the warden and lodge a complaint against you for trespass. I'll teach you that we have laws in Canada."

Then Mr. Tutt, eminent member of the New York Bar that he was, lost all his dignity. They were drifting rapidly downstream towards the bridge and maybe his old voice was tired; perhaps he believed that action spoke louder than words; at any rate—with or without excuse—the distinguished Mr. Tutt placed his antique thumb to the end of his long nose, wiggled his bony fingers at Mr. Micklejohn, and gave vent to an unelegant sound known as "the raspberry" or "Bronx cheer."

By this time it was nearly dark, and a cold wind was blowing up the river.

"Want to go on to Ste. Marie?" asked Donald.

"It's twenty miles. Supper would be over before we got there. And I'd rather meet the sheriff by daylight!" answered Mr. Tutt. "Where else can we go?"

"Jim Ferguson would put us up."

"Okay. Let's go there!"

A campfire in front of a small group of tents threw a cheerful gleam across the river, and it took Donald but a few moments to reach the opposite shore where the genial Ferguson, his pleasant-faced French wife, and Clochette welcomed them on the beach. A full moon was rising above the pines as they finished their modest but savory meal of potato soup, broiled salmon steak and peas, fresh strawberries, and black coffee. Mr. Tutt produced what was left of the bishop's bottle of madeira, and Clochette, without a trace of self-consciousness, her voice rising high and clear, sang for them while they smoked—boating songs of the "voyageurs," Scottish border ballads, and chansons of old France handed down in her mother's family.

"Do you know 'Nanette'?" she asked. "Nanette went down to bathe. That is what I'd been doing when you saw me this afternoon."

*"Au beau clair de la lun' m'en allant promener,  
J'ai rencontre Nanett' qui allait s'y baigner  
Gai, faluron dondaine,  
Gai, faluron donde."*

"And Mr. Tutt thought she was a burrd, Jim!" chuckled old Donald, so Clochette laughed and sang "A la Clair Fontaine"—because it was about a bird.

*"Sur la plus haute branche  
Le Rossignol chantait,  
Chante, rossignol, chante,  
Toi qui as le coeur gai.  
Lui ya longtemps que je t'aime,  
Jamais je ne t'oublierai!"*

"That's what she should be called—'Nightingale!' " averred the old man. "And as the song says, 'I shall never forget her, either!'"

While the women washed the dishes on the shore, Jim Ferguson told the story of Stillwater and the loss of his home. Years ago it had been a thriving town of lumbermen and farmers, surrounded by cleared fields for a quarter mile back on either side of the river. Five generations of Fergusons had lived where the tents were now pitched. There had been a school, a post office, a couple of stores, and daily a small river steamer had come up from Ste. Marie des Isles bringing mail and supplies and keeping the settlement in touch with the outside world. Then the smallpox had ravaged the community, the logging industry had declined, the young folks had moved away, until at last the Fergusons were the only ones left.

As a partial compensation Jim had been able to acquire a large tract of abandoned land for almost nothing. There was a good market for his hay, which he at first had barged down to the coast and, then, after the railroad had come through, had shipped by freight. He prospered, saving enough to add each year to his machinery—tedders, mowers, and sweepstakes—building barns in which to store his crop until he could sell to best advantage, and installing his own press to bale the hay for transportation.

He had married a girl of French descent, and Clochette was their only child. During the winters they moved downriver to Ste. Marie des Isles so that she could go to school. When they discovered that she had a voice, they had sent her to Boston for training. Then the preceding summer just at harvest time when two of the barns had been filled and the rest of the crop was in cocks ready to be "carried," a fire had started near the railroad track and, sweeping across the fields, had destroyed everything including their dwelling house. Not a building had been left, and the insurance had been only sufficient to re-equip them with tents, canoes, and a few tools and keep them going through the winter.

The fire had obviously been started by a spark from The Whooper, and Jim had brought suit for twenty-five thousand dollars through a firm in Ste. Marie des Isles, but his lawyers advised him that the evidence, while morally convincing, was probably insufficient to sustain a judgment, since there was nothing, from a legal point of view, to exclude the possibility that the fire had started through the carelessness



of some fisherman, hunter, or river driver. So they were going to have to start all over again, and Clochette would have to give up her musical career.

"Doesn't Micklejohn know that a spark from one of his engines destroyed your property?" demanded Mr. Tutt.

"Sure he does! Everyone knows it. It's true the fire started over fifty yards from the track, but there was wind enough to carry a spark even farther than that. Besides, there weren't no fishermen anywheres round here except Micklejohn. The skunk wouldn't ha' been above setting it himself!"

"You mean that he might have burned you out purposely?"

"Just what I mean. He's wanted to get rid of me for years so as to have all the fishing on both sides for himself. Y'see I was here first and had my quarter mile of shorefront before he located his camp over there and bought up all the land there was left."

Mr. Tutt had a momentary vision of a black-bearded man with the hunting knife in his hand.

"He's not a good neighbor?"

"We don't speak."

The old lawyer sat smoking by the dying embers of the fire long after all but Donald had gone to bed.

"Is everything Jim said true?" he asked.

"Honest to God!"

"How long has Micklejohn been here?"

"Eleven years—he bought soon as he got to be president of the road."

"When was the bridge built?"

"Nineteen nineteen—seventeen years ago."

"Was the town here then?—Stillwater, I mean."

"Sure! Quite a settlement. My sister lived here with her husband. The smallpox come in 1920. They didn't discontinue the post office until a couple of years later."

"How long since the steamer stopped running?"

"Same time."

"Fourteen years?"

"Just about." Donald got up, stretched, and spat into the fire. "If we're to take The Whooper at five tomorrow morning, what time shall I wake you?"

Mr. Tutt stared across at the bead of light that marked the presence of Local Public Enemy Number One.

"You needn't wake me," he said. "We're not taking The Whooper. If we go to Ste. Marie tomorrow, it will be by canoe."

"I reckon I'll turn in anyhow," answered Donald. "You mayn't be tired, but I be!"

The moon rode higher and higher, a silver dime in a starless sky

azure as by day. Mr. Tutt could see every stone upon the beach, the patches on the bottom of the overturned canoe, the gunnysack containing his personal belongings; could even read the label on a nearby tomato can. Opening the sack he removed a buglight, put it in his pocket, and, lighting a fresh stogy, strolled along the shore towards the railroad bridge.

As he reached the top of the embankment, Micklejohn's lamp winked out, and Mr. Tutt was left alone in the moonlight. The bridge, not more than a hundred yards in length, supported a single narrow-gauge track. Between the wooden ties he could look directly down upon the swirling current of the Santapedia gurgling against the wooden piles fifteen feet below.

Feeling his way gingerly along, for the sides were without protection, Mr. Tutt approached the draw, which consisted merely of a twenty foot section of track resting upon two buttresses, one end being mounted on a horizontal shaft or trunnion. Chains connected with the other or free end were passed over sheaves on the top of the opposite buttress and attached to counterbalance weights which, when released by a mechanical device operated by a hand lever, hoisted the draw, a single-span bascule bridge of rather rudimentary design.

And then the Man in the Moon, were he looking, saw Mr. Tutt do a most peculiar thing. Hanging his long legs over the side of the draw, the old man sat down, fished a piece of string out of his pocket, and, tying his key ring to one end of it, attached the other to the abutment and lowered it to the water; then, turning on his buglight, he lay flat upon his stomach and peered down through the ties.

"H'm!" he said to himself, observing that the keys swung clear of the buttress by about six inches where it emerged from the surface. Getting to his feet, he untied the string and repeated the process at the other end of the draw. "H'm," he repeated in a tone of satisfaction.

Buglight in hand, having returned the string and key ring to his pocket, he examined the joints of the antiquated machinery, rusted and eaten away by the wind and rain. The bolts in one counterweight had disappeared; the lever operating the trunnion was immovable, "frozen" as if welded.

"H'm!" he ejaculated a third time. "If I haven't got that so-and-so, I'll eat my tall hat."

He was aroused by the crackling of a fire outside his tent and the pungent smell of bacon. From the beach below came the warble and trill of Clochette's limpid coloratura:

*"Au beau clair de la lun' m'en allant promener—"*

"How the devil did you know that?" he demanded as she ascended the bank, a pail of water in her hand.

"Know what?"

"Oh, never mind!" he answered. "What time is it?"

"Six o'clock. Didn't you hear The Whooper go by an hour ago?"

"Whooper! It would have taken Big Bertha to wake me up. I slept the sleep of a just man. Tell Donald to get the canoe ready. I'm going to Ste. Marie as soon as I've had my breakfast."

"Are you leaving us for good?" she asked regretfully. "I hoped you'd spend the day with us."

"Oh, I'll be back, Rossignol! Never you fear!"

"I'm sorry for Mr. Micklejohn,

I'm sorry to give him pains,

But a hell of a spree there's going to be

When Tutt comes back again."

The president of the Canadian Seaboard & Gaspé, smoking his after-breakfast cigar on the verandah of his camp, saw the canoe with its tall-hatted occupant skirt the opposite shore and disappear under the bridge.

"I taught that silly old ass a lesson, all right!" he gloated, for he had feared that the trespasser might stay on and fish the quarter mile of water he did not control. His worst nightmare was that Ferguson might build a sporting camp and thus destroy the practical monopoly of the Stillwater which he now enjoyed. But the farmer was too busy haymaking to do any fishing; hence Micklejohn week in and week out had the whole ten miles to himself.

It was another sparkling day, and the president of the C.S. & G., having killed a couple of thirty-pounders, was paddling back for lunch when the noonday silence was unexpectedly broken by an untoward sound, a sound that President Micklejohn had never before heard in that locality—the unmistakable whistle of a steamer just below the bridge.

"Toot-toot-toot! Toot-toot-toot!"

"Damn his eyes!" he cried. "That fool will drive every salmon ten miles upriver!"

"Toot-toot-toot! Toot-toot-toot!" snorted the unseen visitor impatiently.

"What in hell can that fellow want!" exclaimed the railroad man, for never once in the entire eleven years of his occupancy had he seen a steamboat on the Santapedia.

Then, as if with the deliberate intention of demonstrating its nuisance value, the whistle broke into a shrill, continuous, and never-ending scream.

"I'll fix that!" shouted Micklejohn in wrath, climbing the embankment.

A stubby little tug was holding herself in the channel, nosing the draw, tooting her head off.

"What are you making such a noise about?" he yelled above the racket. Then to his amazement and disgust he observed that The Silly Old Ass in the tall hat was sitting on the roof of the pilot house puffing a curious looking rattailed cigar, while on the deck below stood the sheriff of the county and a tall man in a gray felt hat whom Mr. Micklejohn did not recognize. Behind them was a group of strangers in mufti. Since the embankment was but twenty feet above the river, the entire party, including Mr. Micklejohn and Mr. Tutt, were in fairly close juxtaposition.

"Open your draw!" called the captain of the tug from the pilot house window.

"What are you talking about?" answered the president of the C.S. & G. The tug suddenly stopped tooting.

"Let us through!"

"I'm no draw tender!" replied Micklejohn furiously.

"If you ain't, where is he then?" asked the captain.

"There isn't any. This draw hasn't been used in the last fifteen years.

The tug had laid alongside the bridge, and a deckhand now made it fast to the abutment. The tall man stepped forward.

"Beg pardon," he said. "I'm Sir Douglas Hartley, Judge in Admiralty of the Exchequer Court for this district. This gentleman, through his local counsel, has made an informal application before me in chambers for a mandatory injunction to abate a nuisance and to compel the Canadian Seaboard & Gaspé Railroad to maintain its draw in this bridge in accordance with its license. He offered—very fairly, I must admit, since he does not wish to take the railroad company by surprise or to put you to any greater inconvenience than is necessary—to facilitate the proceeding by bringing the court here to see for itself—"

"'Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane!' chirped Mr. Tutt.

"—what the actual conditions may be," continued Sir Douglas, faintly smiling. "I take it that I am addressing Mr. Cyrus Micklejohn, president of the railroad?"

"You are," snapped Micklejohn. "But I'm not here in my official capacity."

"It would appear then that there was nobody here in an official capacity?" suggested Sir Douglas mildly.

"There has never been any reason why there should be."

"Your Honor," said Mr. Tutt from the roof, "this is a navigable stream, and I have hired this steamer to take me to Stillwater. I want to go there. I insist on going there!"

"Well, you can't go there!" roared Micklejohn.

"You've got a draw—open it!"

Mr. Micklejohn stared haughtily at the rusty levers and trunnions and the dilapidated counterweights.

"Nonsense!" he remarked.

"Won't it work?" blandly inquired the sheriff.

"I—I don't know! And I don't care!" retorted Micklejohn.

A businesslike looking young man stepped forward from the group behind the judge. "My name's McAvoy," he said. "I'm Provincial Bridge Engineer. I have two of my assistants here. Suppose we take a look at it."

They climbed up the abutment and examined the draw.

"You're going to have a hard time opening that thing," declared Mr. McAvoy. "The machinery's all rotted to pieces, the iron has frozen—and besides, the piers have sagged so far out of plumb that I don't believe it would work anyway."

Micklejohn took out his handkerchief and rubbed his forehead.

"Well—" he growled. "This is something I shall have to turn over to our law department."

"I took the liberty of having my clerk telephone to your attorney, Mr. Cameron Hall in Cardogan," interjected Sir Douglas. "He said he'd order a special and come down."

"Meanwhile, how am I going to get to Stillwater?" pressed Mr. Tutt.

"Stillwater! There isn't any Stillwater!" snorted Micklejohn.

"Oh yes there is!" replied the old lawyer. "Stillwater continues to be a geographical and legal entity even if it is *functus officio*."

"There aren't any people living there!"

"I know of at least four," answered Mr. Tutt. "Yourself, Mr. and Mrs. Ferguson, and their daughter."

"This is all hocus-pocus!" hotly protested Micklejohn. "Ferguson doesn't want to use the draw! And I'm sure I don't!"

"Yes, I do!" shouted Ferguson, sticking his head out of the pilot house window. "I want to go right up the river."

Mr. Tutt descended from the roof of the pilot house, Micklejohn glaring at him the while. The president of the C.S. & G. had begun to wish he hadn't adopted such strenuous tactics with The Silly Old Ass.

"Your Honor," said Mr. Tutt, landing on the deck, "I appreciate that this isn't either the time or place for a legal argument, but since you've been so amiable as to lend your presence to an attempt at an adjustment of what might otherwise prove a long drawn-out and expensive litigation, I beg to assure you most emphatically that there is no hocus-pocus about it whatsoever. Under the Canadian Railway Act of 1919, no railroad company may build a bridge over any water, river, stream or canal, so as to impede navigation no matter how slight, except with the approval and subject to the directions of the Board of Railway Commissioners and the Ministry of Public Works. That authority, under the powers delegated to it by Parliament, approved the plans submitted in the year 1919 by the Canadian Seaboard & Gaspe for a drawbridge over the Santapedia at this point, on condition that it be operated as

such. The condition having been violated, the authorization is void, and the bridge becomes a public nuisance which can be abated."

"Rot!" bellowed President Micklejohn. "We don't have to keep a man sitting here if the draw is never used."

"You're obliged to keep your draw in operation, or your license lapses. The law says 'it is not the use which has been made of the water, but the use which may be made of it, without a change of conditions, that determines its navigability.'"

"There has been a change," declared Micklejohn sullenly. "There was a town here when the bridge was built, and it isn't here now."

"The phrase 'change of condition' in the law refers not to the number of inhabitants but to the navigability of the stream," declared Mr. Tutt. "So long as there is a single landowner upstream beyond the bridge, he has a right to insist on the railroad's complying with the conditions under which it received its authority to build. It is a riparian right inherent in his ownership of the land."

At that moment a distant whistle echoed through the forest, the rails began to hum, and presently an engine dragging a single day-coach came thundering down the track and stopped at the other end of the bridge. Half a dozen men piled out, among them Cameron Hall, K.C., the railroad's chief legal adviser from Cardogan, the capital of the province. With him were two of the company engineers. By this time everyone from the tug including Sir Douglas, Mr. Tutt, and the sheriff had ascended the embankment.

"Of course I'm here purely ex-officio," said Sir Douglas. "Don't bother about me. I'm enjoying this little excursion immensely. Suppose I take a walk and give you gentlemen a chance to get together?"

While the company engineers looked over the bridge, Cameron Hall, K.C., conferred with Micklejohn, after which they all went into a huddle at the other end of the bridge.

"May I speak to you a moment, sir?" at length said the lawyer, a dignified but kindly looking man advancing towards the draw.

"With pleasure so long as your client doesn't share in our conversation," answered Mr. Tutt. "How about a stroll down the tracks?"

They picked their way along the ties until they reached the opposite shore, where they sat down in the hot sunlight at the same spot where Mr. Tutt had climbed up the night before "*au beau clair de la lune*."

"I've often heard of you, Mr. Tutt," said Hall, K.C., as he accepted a stogy. "But somehow I never supposed you really existed. Certainly it's a great surprise to meet you under circumstances such as these. What do you want us to do?"

"How much do your engineers say it will cost to install proper piers and rebuild the draw?"

Hall squinted at him over the end of his stogy.



"Do you trust me?"

"I know an honest man when I see one."

"That compliment will probably cost me about fifty thousand dollars!" chuckled Hall.

"I could have found it out for myself. In fact I have, rather roughly—only my estimate is thirty-five thousand."

"I too know an honest man when he tells me a thing like that."

"And that will probably cost me about ten thousand!" said Mr. Tutt significantly. "How shall we work it?"

Hall, K.C., looked across at the ruined barns by the little group of tents. "How much damage does Ferguson claim against the company on account of his fire?"

"Twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Our engine didn't set it, you know!"

Mr. Tutt shrugged. "If not, I know who did!"

"I see that we agree—in principle. All right, but, as Eden said to Hitler, 'This isn't an ultimatum.' Suppose we settle the damage suit for twenty thousand and give Ferguson five thousand more for all his riparian rights—including his fishing? In that case, naturally he'll have to sign a special release waiving the discontinuance of the draw."

Mr. Tutt shook his head. "There will be no surrender of any fishing rights whatever. That is an ultimatum!"

"Very good. I was instructed to ask for them, that's all. Now I've done it. How about twenty-four thousand for the fire and a thousand for the bridge release?"

"Not enough!"

Hall, K.C., looked pained.

"There is one more condition which I make as a *sine qua non*," said Mr. Tutt sternly.

"Go easy on us!" begged Hall. "What is it?"

"Upon the signing of the papers Micklejohn is to deliver to me one new twelve-foot mist-colored double leader, two hundred yards of the best salmon line you can buy in Cardogan and—"

Hall's eyebrows had drawn together. What the devil! he seemed to be saying. "Yes—And?"

"And his hunting knife."

"That's a queer one!" ejaculated the K.C.

"Otherwise the C.S. & G. must rebuild the bridge!"

Just then from the neighboring grove came a high, sweet song like that of a bird.

*"Sur la plus haute branche  
Le Rossignol chantant."*

"What a beautiful voice!" exclaimed Hall in admiration. "It's like what I've always supposed a nightingale's would be!"

"Yes," nodded Mr. Tutt. "The C.S. & G. isn't paying for a fire but for a girl's career. Well! Is it a deal?"

"It is," answered Hall, and they shook hands. "Now I'll go and give my most unpleasant client the glad tidings!"

"And be sure to tell him that I've discovered that they have laws in Canada," said Mr. Tutt.

The old man climbed down the embankment and walked over to the grove. He hated to return to the city. New York was all right, but the woods were better. He'd spend all winter planning how to get back to them. His old house on 23rd Street with its comfortable library and sea coal fire—even with Miranda's cooking—would be very lonely. It was hard to say goodbye.

Clochette was sitting against a tree singing her heart out.

"Hello, Mr. Tutt!" she cried. "What are all those people doing on the bridge? And why is that tug there?"

"It's taking me back to New York," answered the old man, looking down at her tenderly. "Would you like to go with me—Rossignol?"

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**T**erence Faherty's **Orion Rising** (St. Martin's, \$22.95) is the seventh outing for Bostonian Owen Keane, dropout seminarian and part-time detective. It's more than his usual disinterested kindness, however, that lures Owen into an investigation into the murder of James Murray. The dead man, Owen, and Owen's oldest friend Harry were campus roommates at Boston College in 1969. The dorm's proximity to the scene of the rape and murder of a nurse made the men serious suspects. Twenty-six years later a clipping left on Murray's body announces that someone has killed him to avenge the nurse's murder. The problem is that Owen knows for a fact that James Murray wasn't the rapist. The past—with its lost love and wrong turns—is always haunting Keane; in *Orion Rising* a chunk of it finally catches up with him.

Ridley Pearson has brought back his series character, Seattle cop Lou Boldt, in a big thriller titled **The First Victim** (Hyperion, \$23.95). When the transfer of a huge crate from one ship to another goes awry in stormy water, the crate is left bobbing in the waves as human cries leak out. Once it's brought ashore, TV news anchor Stevie McNeal and her oldest friend, a freelance reporter named Melissa, want to capture the story for themselves. But it's a deadly tale involving political corruption, Chinese gangs, the power of the press, and millions of dollars to be made from the desperation of would-be immigrants. Pearson is a pro, offering a powerful premise, strong characters, great detail, and a taut plot line.

Stephanie Plum, intrepid girl bounty hunter and terror of New Jersey bail jumpers, is back in her usual high spirits (not to mention hijinks!) in Janet Evanovich's **High Five** (St. Martin's, \$23.95). The main plot focuses on Steph's missing Uncle Fred, a man so eminently missable that even his wife of decades is less than enthusiastic at the prospect of his return. Nevertheless, family is family. Thus it falls to Stephanie to trace Fred's movements in the odd moments she has between outwitting a wily dwarf who missed his court appearance and

shopping for the perfect outfit for a big Italian wedding she's attending with her sometimes boyfriend, who's also a cop. There's much more, of course, in the wacky, hilarious world of Stephanie Plum. Read it yourself and enjoy.

M. D. Lake's tenth mystery to feature campus cop Peggy O'Neill, **Death Calls the Tune** (Avon, \$5.99), will keep readers humming. A middle-aged music professor falls to his death from the cliffs above Lake Superior. The official early pronouncement is that Evan Turner committed suicide, but his daughter swears he was deathly afraid of heights. She concludes her father was murdered. Assigned to investigate at the behest of Turner's wealthy grandmother (and university benefactor), Peggy's sirens are calling to her from two directions. The music department has been methodically looted of expensive sound equipment—there is the possibility Turner was involved or knew enough to be a threat to the thieves. On a different note, the trail leads thirty years back to when Turner and his cronies sported long hair and played for tips in local coffeehouses. For a generation known for its songs about peace and love, several of these flower children have old secrets marked by jealousy, greed, and rage. As always, Peggy O'Neill's sharp tongue, quick wit, and deep compassion disguised in a tough shell make her great company along the way to solving the mystery of Evan Turner's death.

Molly Lasch, thirty-one and beautiful, has just been released from prison, having spent more than five years in jail after pleading guilty to bashing in her husband's head with a blunt object. Molly couldn't tell the jury herself what happened that night because she suffered from amnesia. She'll return to the lavish home she once shared with her late husband, surgeon Gary Lasch; she'll have a chance to see her best friend often again; and she'll fall into a new routine with the same woman who had been the Lasches' housekeeper at the time of Gary's death. But there is one problem with Molly's homecoming: It doesn't suit the real killer one bit now that Molly is surrounded by familiar objects and is hopeful she can regain her memory. Thus Mary Higgins Clark embarks on her irresistible tale **We'll Meet Again** (Simon & Schuster, \$25). With that setup, who can resist this one?

Marian Babson has penned another of her feline mysteries titled **The Company of Cats** (St. Martin's, \$20.95). Co-starring with Sally, a murdered millionaire's cat, is the irrepressible albeit impoverished socialite Annabel Hinchby-Smythe. Annabel generally picks up her spending money by selling odd bits of gossip and scandal to the highest bidder (usually the tabloids). But a chance remark at a social gathering leads a reclusive business tycoon to believe that Annabel is actually an interior decorator. That is how our heroine finds herself on the spot when the poor man dies in his London flat. Don't look for substance here, rather, this is a jolly good meringue of a mystery.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The April Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Greg Matejek of Belle Mead, New Jersey. Honorable mentions go to Jeff Baker of



Wichita, Kansas; Todd Mason of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Joseph R. Quinlan of Asheville, North Carolina; Al Cross of Sacramento, California; Da-

vid S. Devane of Chicago, Illinois; Kathy Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Ronald L. Colella of St. Petersburg, Florida;

James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Tracy Dunham of Richmond, Virginia; and Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

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## A CASE OF GRAVE ROBBERING by Greg Matejek

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"Okay, fellas, one more time," says an exhausted Robert Meyers, the cemetery superintendent, to Moe and Joe, two of his gravediggers. "On Friday you guys dug a grave for Lionel Lionman right behind his family's monument."

"That's right, sir," replies Joe. "Then on Monday we came to work and found that the hole was missing. We think someone stole the hole and planted grass over the spot where it was."

"Did it ever occur to you guys that maybe Mr. Lionman died and was buried during the weekend?" asks Meyers as patiently as he can.

Moe and Joe look at each other, then shake their heads no.

"Okay, so you two thought the hole was stolen and that you would be held accountable for it," continues Meyers. "So you decided to dig another hole on the same spot, hoping that no one would notice that the first hole was missing. Thus, you dug up Mr. Lionman's empty coffin, proving that he faked his death for the insurance money. A fact the insurance company was so grateful to learn that they paid you guys a reward."

They both smiled and nodded their heads yes.

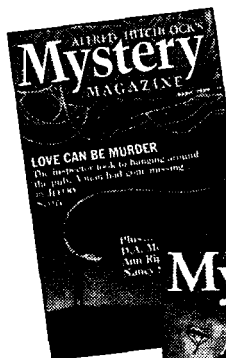
"Okay, I have all that. Now, what is bothering you guys?" asks Meyers.

"Well, it's like this," says Moe very sheepishly. "Ah . . . well . . . are we going to have to pay for the first hole?"

# MYSTERY VALUE PACK

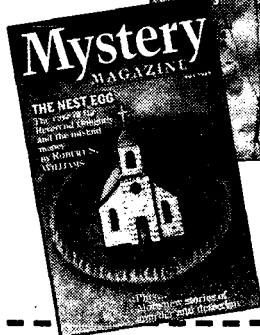
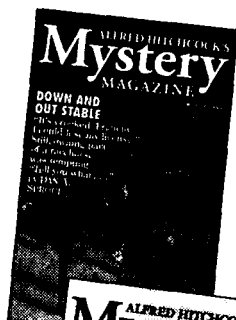
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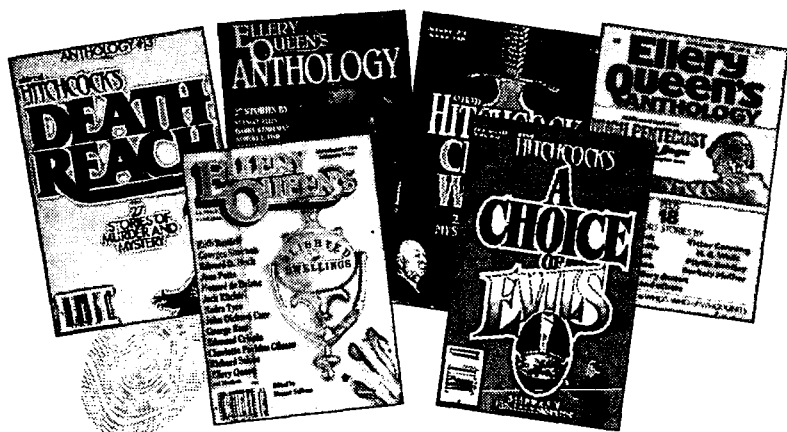
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## SKIN CARE UPDATE

# The "hidden" problem that forces millions of women to wear pants... and the natural solution!

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by Melinda Walthington



It's estimated that half of the adult female population is plagued by spider veins! Small, thin veins lying close to the skin's surface, spider veins are red or blue in color. They may appear in true "spider" fashion, with web-like

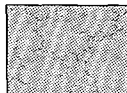
groups of veins radiating out from a central area, they can look like fine lines or appear in "starburst" clusters. Although men are not immune to spider veins, they are overwhelmingly a female problem. Unlike large, bulging varicose veins that can cause pain and even lead to serious health problems, spider veins are primarily a cosmetic problem.

Not even proper diet and exercise are guaranteed to prevent unsightly spider veins. They tend to be hereditary, and worsen as we age. Aside from changing the way you dress, using concealing makeup or resorting to expensive treatments, there has been little you could do to get rid of spider veins—until now!

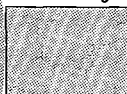
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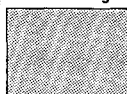
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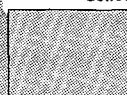
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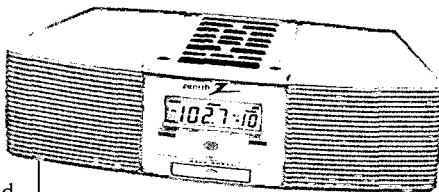
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